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# Justice and boundaries in ancient stories : guidance for modern bioethics

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*University of Tennessee*

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Timothy George Elledge entitled "Justice and boundaries in ancient stories : guidance for modern bioethics." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Philosophy.

Glenn Graber, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

John Hardwig, Jonathan Kaplan, David Tandy

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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# JUSTICE AND BOUNDARIES IN ANCIENT STORIES:
## Guidance for modern bioethics

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Timothy George Elledge
May 2002

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, George and Carol Elledge,
my wife, Margo O'Malley Elledge, and my daughters,
Jessica Carolyn Alexandra Elledge
and Caitlin Flannery Markham Elledge.
Their love and support made this possible and worth doing.

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Til swoll'n with cunning, of a self-conceit,
His waxen wings did mount above his reach
And melting, heavens conspired his overthrow!
—Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus* (1588)

There is nothing in heaven or on earth, no mystery in religion, no secret in nature which can defy the power and efforts of reason.
—Leibniz, *Philosophical Texts* (1849)

From time to time I visit the home where I grew up on Hyndford Street in Belfast.
It's called healing through the past. I don't yearn for it, but you have to sort of go back to find out where you are.
—Van Morrison, *Interview* (1997)

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**Introduction**

We can find in ancient and Biblical literature certain values that are of the lineage shared by much of Western culture today. Because of their persistence, they comprise part of what Hilary Putnam calls the 'moral image' we have of ourselves. Knowing that these values have endured enables us to claim more justification in employing them in discussions of moral dilemmas today. Mere persistence, however, does not ensure that a value should continue to be honored. Some long-honored values have persistently led to human suffering.

Still, the continuity of values over time suggests that they may offer insight into norms of human nature that should be taken seriously. We get information from the culture's stories about when violations of these values lead either to human suffering or human thriving. If we are sufficiently attentive to the various currents of the West's canonic literature—new and old—it may be possible to begin sorting out which values we should set aside and which we should keep as part of our 'moral image.'

This process of sorting out what is worth keeping and what we want to shed is part of what I think is the solution to the difficulty that recurs in projects like mine: When it is claimed that useful values can be found in a culture's stories, how can we determine which of the values and which of the stories may be helpfully employed in furthering human well-being rather than perpetuating human suffering? For every ancient story about slavery causing suffering or about the unjust exercise of power and authority resulting in the subjugation of women or others, there are many other stories that tend to support societal practices that perpetuate slavery or subjugation.

I suggest in chapter II.e that we may begin to allay this difficulty by how we read and employ ancient stories. Part of this process involves methods used by oral societies in their telling of stories; part involves the application of contemporary moral sensibility. In what I will suggest, I assume moral progress—which I am convinced can be defended, although I will not develop the defense here. I assume that over time we have expanded the breadth of our moral encompassment—that is, we include within our sphere of encompassment more than we did in the past. I argue that our stories chart that expansion, and can show us ways to further enlarge the encompassment.

Implicit in my claim is a rejection of post-modern reductive views of ethics that call not for better thinking about ethics, but for wholesale abandonment of all binary moral oppositions. It is largely the case that the Western canon of literature, and of moral philosophy, is weighted in favor of those who have held power. And consciousness of this has been irreversibly imprinted on our understandings by Marxists, feminists, and race-theorists. But we will not be shedding binary oppositions like 'good' and 'bad' anytime soon. Instead, my

claims rely on a belief in our ability over time to change those parts of the conventional moral code that are repressive or coercive or otherwise denying of human well-being. I argue that while moral codes have served to support beliefs that the hegemonic group is good and the other is bad, this is not all that moral codes do; they also, at their best, provide guidance that is life-enhancing and that encourages equitable relationships. My justification for this claim is not without some circularity, but as Richard Rorty argues, there probably are no justifications entirely free of that defect.

The recurrence of certain themes in stories indicates that these themes are not trivial. The theme on which I concentrate is that there are boundaries limiting appropriate human action, human striving, and human domain. These claimed boundaries incorporate values that over time have developed a firm hold on us. Stories tend to suggest that violation of these boundaries—and thus, values—usually leads to human difficulty rather than human thriving. We ignore the stories at our peril because they have the potential to give us helpful information about our experience as human beings in the world. While anomolous stories might suggest contradictory evidence, it is the weight of common understandings as depicted in stories, over time, that provides insight. The stories that persist, that are reshaped by new generations and told again, are those tales to which we are drawn by a desire to understand ourselves and the best way to be with others.

But, again, one of the difficulties is to differentiate what is helpful about a moral tradition from what is merely traditional. Another is that mere persistence does not imply that we ought honor the tradition. Clamors for honoring tradition may be simply a reactionary resistance to change. In an effort to begin resolving

these and other difficulties, I suggest in chapter II.e that we employ a method that, assuming moral progress, encourages us to look at ancient literature in two useful ways. The first element of this method is to see how these values began forming and to learn something about their evolution. The second is to think about what ancient stories can teach us, but to do this in light of all we have learned since their conception. Thus, rather than examine *Antigone* solely in the way a fifth century Greek would have understood the story—which we cannot—we should look for the communal understandings it depicts, and consider them from a modern viewpoint that incorporates a value system that has evolved for twenty four-hundred years.

By doing this, we can use understandings gained from examining ancient literature to find commonalities that not only endure, but that also seem to encourage human well-being. Where these commonalities persist, we can claim some justification for using them when we seek resolution of modern dilemmas. If, as I have already suggested, we consider these values through the prism of more than two thousand years of experience, we can bring to them not just what Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Milton understood, but also what we have been taught by Kant, Mill, Gandhi, de Beauvoir, King, Rawls, and others.

In addition, using stories to gain moral information provides a kind of understanding not available by way of usual philosophical discourse. Something about our response to stories allows us to see in a way that reading a Kantian text, for example, does not. The form of stories, with their rich descriptions and their insights into human experience, gives us access to more than merely another of the currents of a moral claim; it provides a wholly different kind of moral message. The parable of the good Samaritan explicates the principle "Love

your neighbor" in a way that cannot be captured in the form of an ethical principle, however detailed and nuanced. Tragic drama in particular, because it is focused on human life as we experience it in the world, is less abstract and thus is concerned with real losses and reversals, and with the emotional responses to these as they play out in the complexities of our familial, communal, and erotic attachments.

Further, among the claims of those opposed to the development and use of some new medical technologies is that tools such as cloning and genetic therapies are arrogant infringements on god's work, or in some way violate appropriate limits. This dissertation argues that boundaries referred to as "god's work" or "appropriate limits" on human action are an essential element of ancient and Biblical literature, and that this theme continues into the modern period. As such, ancient and Biblical literature contains the development of the boundary claims employed in current debates. Because Western culture developed from the Greek and Judaic cultures, it is helpful to see where some of these persistent beliefs originated.

This dissertation does not attempt to justify or employ the values described to speak in any significant way to either side of the debate about emerging technologies. Instead, it should be seen as a contribution to the background of the debate. When stories point to values related to appropriate limits and warnings about entering divine realms they are acting as cautionary guides. Neither does this dissertation seek to show how specific stories can be related to the discussion of modern dilemmas. I will argue instead that our stories—mythological, Biblical, and secular—can be employed to develop more

understanding about what we value in human life, and thus about the good of human life.

Leon Kass demonstrated his understanding of the power of cautionary elements in stories when he chose to use Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" to begin the recent meetings of the President's Council on Bioethics, which Kass chairs.[1] Kass used the story because he understands, like Kierkegaard, that there are limits to what philosophical discourse can describe. Kierkegaard argued that there are subjective matters that are important, but which cannot be stated directly, only indicated.[2]

Later in the meetings, Council member Gilbert Meilaender also cited stories as a source of understanding in deliberations about whether there should be limits to human reach. He used Ernest *Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea,* for example, to illustrate a point warning against thinking about "human beings as no more than collections of parts." A Galway Kinnell poem, *After Making Love We Hear Footsteps,* portrayed Meilaender's discussion of the bond between generations and the danger that new technologies could lead to an image of the child "as the parents' project or product." Ending his talk to the council, Meilaender referred to Dante's *Inferno,* where Ulysses is described as one of the "false counselors" who used their intellectual gifts in ways that ultimately led others astray. Meilaender cited John Sinclair's description of the Ulysses passage in saying the story is a compelling account of the "eternal and insatiable human

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1. See http://www.bioethics.gov/meetings/200201/intro.html. The story is about a scientist who loves his wife but kills her in the attempt to remove her single imperfection, a birthmark on her left cheek. He became so obsessive he tried to bring to bear all his learning and resources to remove the flaw, whatever the cost.

hunger and quest after knowledge of the world." Yet while there are dangers in the quest, he said, we cannot but admire those who make the journey. Thus, "our finitude and freedom are not easily reconciled" and so it is in this conflict of competing goods that bioethics seeks to "discern right order."[3]

To sum up, the argument I employ is that there are commonly held beliefs about divinely or otherwise established boundaries. These beliefs are used in the current discussion about developing medical technologies. The values implied by those beliefs are evident in ancient and Biblical literature. Knowing where those values originated and that they persist is helpful in developing understanding of why the same values are employed today, and whether they have weight. Further, this is a first step in critically evaluating these claims. I do not hope to provide complete criteria for sorting out valid from spurious claims, but what I am trying to do is linked to that task. I suggest a method by which we may begin to be able to determine which stories and which values may contribute to human well-being and which do not. I argue further that stories can provide understanding about human life that is not available in traditional philosophical discourse. The evidence used to support the dissertation's overall arguments is the stories themselves, as well as the justification in chapter II. All of this is within the framework of recognizing that Fredric Jameson warned about when he said that ethics can be an ideological vehicle serving primarily to legitimize structures

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2. Kierkegaard 1992.

3. See http://www.bioethics.gov/meetings/200201/intro.html.

of power and domination, such that moral codes become mere masks of the will-to-power of the dominant class, race, or gender.[4]

4. Jameson 1981, 114.

## Chapter I: Outline of Issues

Summary

This chapter is an outline of many of the issues and beliefs that will be considered in more depth in subsequent chapters. The discussion includes the variety of boundaries perceived by Western culture as human beings have tried to fathom the farthest reaches of what circumscribes their lives. Finding these boundaries, such as that of appropriate justice and proper use of knowledge—is made more complex because the limits shift over time. The later sections of this chapter discuss the way stories may help us understand the development and nature of boundaries, as well as point to enduring values that may with some justification be employed in discussion of modern dilemmas.[5]

### *a. The human/divine boundary*

Among the elements of what Hilary Putnam calls "moral image"[6] is the conception of ourselves as part of a larger and mysterious whole, a whole within which we have certain obligations of behavior. It is said that we exist in one realm, but that there is another realm, some other part of the larger whole that is the realm of divinity. Many religious traditions say it is from this second realm that creation itself emanated. In the Jewish tradition, for example, an eruption of creative force from God's realm brings the universe into existence. God must remain concealed from humanity if the universe is to continue in existence, for if

5. The justification is in chapter II, below.

6. Putnam 1987, 41ff. Also see Putnam 1990. Putnam says (1987, 89, note 8) he adopted the term "moral image" from Dieter Henrich's lectures at Harvard on Kant's Transcendental Deduction. During a 1990 series of lectures at Stanford, Henrich further considered the idea of a moral image (published as Henrich 1992).

God and His realm were to become apparent, His "complete fullness" would leave "no room for the existence of anything else."[7] These traditions also argue that it is from this realm that moral authority is grounded

The idea that god's realm is forbidden to us and that existence itself is at stake makes the search for more knowledge about it even more fearsome, and more tantalizing. Adam and Eve are the archetypes for this temptation and our curiosity has not waned since their banishment from the garden. We think that if we could get a better glimpse of divinity's forbidden landscape, if we could get more bits of knowledge from Prometheus, we could develop understanding of the whole; we might gain knowledge not just of fire but of all the secrets of the universe, perhaps even of immortality itself. But that understanding is sheltered from our grasp, and we suspect, or perhaps fear in some primordial part of us, that there indeed are places we should not go. The resulting tension, between fearful uncertainty and unrestrained arrogance, holds humanity in a fretful state of perpetual distress, forever teetering on the edge of shedding caution and testing the patience of whatever gods control the universe.

In the ancient world, long before and long after the first appearances in Greek thought of science and natural philosophy,[8] a large measure of disease

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7. Steinsaltz 1980, 21.

8. For example, in *On the Sacred Disease*, the author makes the claim, which would be attributed to the Hippocratics generally, that all diseases have natural causes, 1–6.352.1ff, 2–6.364.9ff, 18–6.394.9ff., in Jones 1923. A discussion of this appears in Lloyd 1987, *Revolutions*, 13ff., and in Lloyd., ed. 1978. *Hippocratic Writings*. The development of natural philosophy, especially among the presocratics, may have begun a process of demystifying traditional assumptions, but for much of it, as Lloyd argues in *Revolutions* at 49, the new wisdom was often "no more than the myth of the elite that produced it." Lloyd discusses this in relationship to the provenance of Hippocratic texts in "The Hippocratic Question," 1975, in *Classical Quarterly* 25.2: 171–92.

was believed to be within the jurisdiction of religion and ritual, and the causes for many diseases were said to be located in the divine realm.[9] Access to understanding was accomplished by divination, charms, dreams,[10] and the narratives of mythology.[11] But healers did not find in these sources the kind of direct answers to questions that increasingly would be sought as scientific medicine developed;[12] these answers were of the kind having to do with prayer, sacrifice, magic, and divining the intention and desires of the gods.[13] What was

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9. Lloyd 1987, 4: ". . . death, disease, madness, dreams, divination, and fate. . . . were the province of myth, religion, and ritual . . ." Clearly, however, not all disease was thought to be of divine origin. For example, whereas the plague was sent by Apollo in the *Iliad* 1.43ff, other ailments, colds perhaps and certainly wounds incurred during battle, were of other origin, although whether the wound would kill or not may have been ascribed at least in part to gods. On this, see Lloyd, *Revolutions*, 12, n. 33. The connection between disease and divinity is in, for example, Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 106ff, and at 242: ". . . the son of Cronus brings a great disaster from heaven: hunger and plague together."

10. Herophilus includes "god-sent" dreams in his classification of three types (also Aetius 5.2.3), in Von Staden 1989. Galen discusses diagnosis from dreams in a commentary on *Epidemics*, book 1–5.10.1.108.1ff. An entire Hippocratic treatise, *On Regime*, sometimes called *On Dreams*, discusses dreams. Aristotle endorses as "reasonable" the use of consulting dreams as a source of diagnostic information in *On Divination in Sleep* 463a4ff.

11. Although, as always, there are exceptions, and it is difficult to educe whether the exception is the rule, or not, because our sources are limited. Democritus in fr. 234 says "Men ask for health, in their prayers, from the gods, but they do not know that they have in themselves the power to attain this: doing the opposite out of lack of control they themselves become the betrayers of their health to their desires." Cf. Also frr. 119 and 175 (Lloyd 1987, 18, n.56). Also in the *Odyssey* at 1.48ff., Zeus insists that while men blame gods for their troubles, evils in general come not from heaven but from mortals' own wickedness.

12. Lloyd 1979. Especially chapter one. Mention of the shift away from the supernatural causation of disease and expectation that the supernatural will help with disease is also found in Thucydides 2.47 and 2.53. The Hippocratic claim that even madness has natural causes is echoed in nonmedical literature in, e.g., Xenophon *Memorabilia* 3.12.6, and in Herodotus, who at 3.33 suggests that Cambyses became insane either because he offended Apis or suffered from the sacred disease (epilepsy), which is claimed in Herodotus and the Hippocratic corpus as primarily a bodily condition. Similar suggestions in Herodotus put Cleomenes' mental affliction in the realm of natural cause, 6.75ff. and 84. Also Lloyd 1979, 29ff., and 1987, 23ff.

13. Whether and to what extent this and other claims about the Greeks represent common attitudes rather than merely the imaginative work of poetic creation is, as Lloyd says in *Revolutions*, "highly problematic" (7, n.15). But, while much of our understanding is limited to what is gathered from a few poetic sources, the themes appear often enough,

learned from the answers provided comfort and perhaps healing because socially sustained patterns of behavior supported the methods.[14] The diviners[15] were a kind of Promethean intermediary, intending by their methods to gather advice and secrets from the gods and return with them to the human realm.

The dialogue about human/divine boundaries begins in ancient mythological/religious stories and continues in secular literature. Certain stories and works of art tell us more about this than others. For example, the art, literature, and theology of Judaism and Christianity transformed the Greek veil between divinity and humanity into a thick curtain; God's realm along with its workings and purposes became strictly off limits. Giovanni de Palo's fifteenth century painting "The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise" shows God as a clearly transcendent divinity, residing above, in a separate realm, with a boundary between it and the world of humanity. God may be able to observe the world, perhaps manipulate its physics, and interfere with human action, but we are barred from knowing the divine realm. What humans should know is restricted to the domain they properly inhabit. In Western sacred literature, Adam and Eve—like Prometheus before them—were punished for transgressing the borders of that domain, and while they may have entered one thin layer of divine geography by eating from the tree of knowledge, the rest of God's realm is forbidden. As we shall see, the Greek conception of this boundary

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and are sufficiently echoed in later periods, that it seems likely they are relevant to understanding the background for the issues I discuss.

14. Lloyd 1987 discusses this at length in reference to death and disease, 5ff.

15 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1972/1981, 9ff. An exception, especially in the presocratic period, was Xenophanes, who is reported to have rejected all forms of divination (*Cicero On Divination* 1.3.5, *Aetius* 5.1.2, in Lloyd 1987, 38, n. 121). By the time *On Regimen in*

is far more fluid; a few heroic individuals, for example, seem to achieve divine status, perhaps even a kind of immortality,[16] but there is throughout Greek literature the clear warning that human reach often extends too far and thus risks disaster.

The boundary and the issues involved are portrayed in many ways, but constant in them is the perceived danger that our curiosity, desires, stupidities, passions, and arrogance may one day lead us over the proverbial edge. Thus, when I refer to the divine realm, or to God's realm, it is important to understand that this may or may not be viewed literally, and often when I use the image, it is a metaphor for whatever lies outside humanity's appropriate reach. In this sense, the boundary may take the form of a demarcation between action that is justly appropriate for human beings and action that is not. The issue of boundaries thus comprises Creon's decision to refuse burial to Polyneices, Achilleus's mutilation of Hector's body, Prometheus's giving fire to humanity, eating fruit from the forbidden tree, as well as others.

*b. Treading on forbidden ground*

In this section, as well as in chapters III, IV, and V, I chart the development of the idea in the West that there is a veil that should not be breached between humanity's realm and God's realm, or, analogously, between appropriate human

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*Acute Disease* was written by the Hippocratic author, warnings were offered about the danger of medicine being confused with divination (Jones 3, 4.100.3f.).

16. For example, the *Odyssey* 4.561ff (Menelaus), 11.300ff (Castor and Polydeuces), 11.601ff (Heracles), and perhaps Oedipus in *OC*, 1553ff.

actions and action proscribed for human beings.[17] I do this mostly in secular, mythological, and sacred stories, but also in the literature of philosophy. It is a line that, when crossed, leads us unwisely to "playing God"[18] or acting in such a way that we tread on forbidden ground, acting outside the scope of what is properly human and is thus "unnatural" to human life. C. S. Lewis used this idea in expressing his concern about the "unnaturalness" of controlling human reproduction.[19] In philosophy, the relevance of deciding what is "natural" has largely been set aside. "Natural compared to what?" is the objection that dulls the force of the claim. But while most philosophical argumentation belittles "naturalness" as a criterion, often equating it merely with whatever has not been done in the past, there persists a cultural perception that is intuitively powerful. The National Bioethics Advisory Commission 1997 report on cloning, for example, speaks to the issue as it relates to theological concerns:

> Although Genesis notes that creation is "good" and humanity "very good," humans have displayed, according to some traditions, an irremediable propensity to use their divinely authorized dominion for unauthorized domination, to violate their covenant of partnership with God, and to create after their own image rather than the divine image. The person created in the image of God is thus also marked by a tendency to transgress limits . . .The narratives in Genesis . . . appear in religious discussions of . . . tendencies to transgress appropriate limits.[20]

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17. Nicholas Rescher refers to this in relationship to there perhaps being some information that we are not equipped to deal well with. See below, chapter IV.c, 249.

18. A discussion of this is in John Harris 1975. "The Survival Lottery," in *Philosophy* 50: 84. Also James Walter 1999, "Theological issues in Genetics," in *Theological Studies* vol. 60.1: 124.

19. Lewis 1947/1948, 69.

20. *Cloning Human Beings.* Report and recommendations of the National Bioethics Advisory Commission, 1997, chapter 3, 47.

Seeing the development of this perception may give us clues about why we feel squeamish in breaching the veil and thus may provide guidance for when it is appropriate to do so. This dissertation does not speak to how this issue is addressed in other cultures. However interesting it would be to see where parallels and divergences occur, that is another project.

I suggest in chapter IV that this boundary, as well as other limits, can be viewed in relationship to several issues, including cloning humans[21] and genetic manipulation. I do not suggest that embedded in our stories is a moral map that delimits precisely how to use new technologies and when we reach too high. Still, it can be helpful to the discussion to see that certain relevant values and disvalues occur over and over in our stories. For example, if we can get at what we value about ourselves as humans, it could help us understand at what point in altering ourselves we begin to endanger those values.

An important question related to the use of new information and technologies is whether taboos represent anything more than prejudice that should be outgrown. Why do we think it is bad to play god? Is playing god merely our fearful way of describing anything new in science? John Harris argues that "in the absence of an argument or ability to point to some specific harm that is involved in crossing species boundaries, we should regard the objections per se to such practices . . . as mere and gratuitous prejudice."[22] Anthropologist Mary Douglas says, however, that humans have a natural

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21. While cloning is sometimes an ambiguous term, I mean by it somatic cell nuclear transfer, not embryo twinning or molecular cloning. While the cloning of organs and tissue might be subject to some of the same cultural beliefs as those applied to cloning human beings, I generally refer only to human cloning.

aversion to crossing categories, and that when we do transgress we see it as deeply wrong.[23] When we talk about xenotransplantation, for example, we cross categories and thus may perceive violation of a boundary. A crossing of categories, and certainly of boundaries, occurs when we move from accepted scientific methods that are comfortably in our realm to new methods that seem to be transgressing territory previously thought to reside in god's realm. It has been said that we could be crossing forbidden boundaries if we shift from begetting or "creating" babies to designing and manufacturing babies.[24] A boundary is certainly at stake when we affect the evolutionary process by altering the human genome in ways that we pass along those changes from generation to generation rather than make changes that affect one person only.

When Christiaan Barnard performed the first heart transplant in 1967, some feared the procedure crossed the line into god's realm, that something important about human identity and sanctity was violated by the transfer of body parts—a forbidden crossing of boundaries, perhaps of categories. Christians who believe in whole-body resurrection fear that the integrity of the body is a necessary prerequisite for their participation in god's kingdom, partly because of

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22. Harris 1992, 84.

23. Douglas 1978, 7ff.

24. Leon Kass, for example, argues against cloning because it would "represent a giant step toward turning begetting into making, procreation into manufacture" in Pence 1998, 29. Gilbert Meilander makes a similar argument in saying it is intrinsically wrong to reduce sexual reproduction to "replication" and that cloned children might not be regarded as gifts, in Pence 1998, 41–42. He makes the additional claim that the naturalness of human reproduction will lose deep "moral significance." Paul Ramsey and Joseph Fletcher discussed this issue in a series of exchanges about the possibility that we could be altering the paradigm of childbearing to one of manufacturing children. Fletcher asserted that gaining more control over childbearing affords more advantages than disadvantages. Ramsey disagreed. Fletcher in Hastings Center Report 2/5

the Biblical assertion that the dead shall be raised incorruptible.[25] The belief may have roots in ancient Egyptian beliefs about the dead needing a mostly intact body to travel after death.[26] Some groups of orthodox Jews argue that as God forbids tattooing and body piercing, so too does organ transplantation violate divine proscription.[27] Epictetus in the second century c.e. said he admires the man who accepts death rather than dramatically alter his body to forestall death. In *Discourses*, he tells the story of an athlete who must decide whether to have his genitals removed or risk death. "He would not submit," Epictetus said, "but hardened his heart and died. And as someone asked, 'How did he do this? As an athlete, or as a philosopher?'" Epictetus replies: "As a man."[28]

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(November 1972), 1–4 and Hastings Center Report 4/5 (December 1974), 4–7. Also see below, note 26.

25. I Corinthians 15:52ff. Translations vary, some of which suggest that the dead shall be raised imperishable, meaning they become of spiritual substance. But the point is that whether it is incorruptible or imperishable, some claim this means the body must be kept whole or mostly whole to qualify for resurrection.

26. Despelder and Strickland1996, 551ff. Also see John Hick 1976/1985, *Death and Eternal Life*; David Edwards, 1999, *After Death?*, London: Cassell, 108.

27. This is not the usual position of most Jewish traditions, including conservative, reform, and reconstructionist Judaism. Prohibition on organ transplantation is limited mostly to some elements of the orthodox tradition. Eliot Dorff, a Conservative rabbi and medical ethicist, in his *Matters of Life and Death, a Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics*. 1998. Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, says: ". . . saving a person's life and acting faithfully and kindly to others are values so sacred in Judaism that if a person's organ can be used to preserve someone else's life, it is actually an honor to the deceased person to use the organ in that way." Dorff notes, however, that "Despite this predominant opinion, some rabbis have limited organ transplantation to varying degrees," 225–26. Also Baruch Brody, "The use of Halakhic material in discussions of medical ethics," in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*. 1983, 8: 317–328. Also Brody's "Response to Franck's 'Jewish Religious Law' and White's 'Common Law,' in *The Clinical Encounter*, 1983, Earl Shelp, ed., Boston: Reidel. Also, Fred Rosner and J. David Bleich, 1999, *Jewish Bioethics*, Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing. Benjamin Freedman, 1999, *Duty and Healing, Foundations of a Jewish Bioethic*, New York: Routledge. Fred Rosner, ed., 1990, *Medicine and Jewish Law*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson. Lipschutz, 1999, "To clone or not to clone—a Jewish perspective," in *Journal of Medical Ethics* 25: 105–107.

28. Epictetus, *Discourses* I.2.26.

While fears and uncertainties persist, time, cultural changes, and scientific developments have mostly allayed concern about issues related to organ transplantation—as they have for other new medical technologies. For example, a shift may already be occurring in perceptions of boundary issues related to human cloning. The first reactions of revulsion have diminished as popular and scholarly commentators begin to suggest that some limited uses for cloning can be justified, or that many of our concerns about cloning ought be set aside. Kathinka Evers argues, for example, that concerns about clones not having "unique identity" are "untenable."[29] Michael Tooley similarly seeks to disabuse us of concerns related to producing human organisms without the capacity to become persons, saying there are no ethically problematic aspects of creating a "mindless organ bank."[30] Gregory Pence agrees, claiming that there is ethical justification for cloning embryos that will not become persons. It is, he says, an "obvious philosophical point that embryos are not persons with rights to life. Lauren Slater offers the observation of plastic surgeon Fred Rosen: "Who says it's bad to play God? We already alter the course of God's will in hundreds of ways. Using antibiotics to combat infection. Who says the natural course of things is even right? Maybe God isn't good." He says that because we have always altered ourselves, "for beauty or for power, and so long as we are not

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29. Evers 1999. "The identity of clones," in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 24.1: 67–76. A similar argument is made by Gould, who argues in a discussion of cloning that personal identity is a "nonexistent problem," in Pence 106. If Evers and Gould are right here, it supports Jan Heller's argument that "religiously based objections to human cloning" are weakened unless they can demonstrate that cloning "will undermine the identity formation of cloned children or the relational and social qualities of family life," in *Human Cloning*, 1998, James Humber and Robert Almeder, eds. Totowa, NJ: Humana Press, 153–155.

30. Tooley, in Humber and Almeder 1998, 65, 68.

causing harm, what makes us think we should stop?"[31] Joseph Fletcher agrees, at least in part, asserting that cloning is preferable to the genetic roulette of sexual reproduction.[32]

Leon Kass considers cloning repulsive[33] but nevertheless believes our revulsion will diminish, partly because our pluralistic society lacks certain shared values. He says it is "now vastly more difficult to express a common and respectful understanding of sexuality, procreation, nascent life, family, and the meaning of motherhood, fatherhood and the links between the generations."[34] Legal theorist John Robertson argued that cloning is covered by the culture's general and legal understanding of rights related to reproduction.[35] He says ". . . our ethical, legal, and social commitment to reproductive and family liberty should place the burden on opponents to show that family-centered uses of cloning are not truly procreative."[36] And, while Philip Kitcher is generally opposed to cloning, he accepts that there will be some uses that are ethical.[37] Leon Eisenberg has since early in the discussion of cloning argued strongly that cloning will contribute to human well-being. His voice is among those that have been shifting public perception. He rejects "categorically the proposal that we turn back at the edge of greater understanding of the biology of life, an

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31. Slater 2001, 57ff.

32. Fletcher 1988, 6ff.

33. See Kass 2001 and Kass 1971.

34. Kass 1998, 15.

35. Robertson 1998, 89.

36. Robertson 1998, 96. Also John Robertson 1994, *Children of choice: freedom and the new reproductive technologies.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press

37. Kitcher 1998, 68.

understanding which can increase our dominion over ourselves.[38] My discussion of these and other boundaries is throughout circumscribed by the questions raised about whether boundaries, perhaps like all else within the domain of moral codes, are merely ideological constructs to further empower the hegemonic group. This will be considered in more detail in chapter II.e.

### *c. Shifting boundaries*

A part of the Western psyche firmly believes that some knowledge should remain inaccessible because it is in god's domain, and some of the concern is that just because it has been inaccessible does not imply that it will always be inaccessible. The problem has been that we are often unsure exactly what resides in that realm and what in this. Is cloning properly within our reach, or is it outside the bounds of justice, outside the limits of right action for human beings? Details of the boundary's deployment shift regularly. For example, ancient beliefs supposed the gods to control the details of natural events in this world, and yet, except for a few exceptional mortals, humanity was precluded from understanding or interfering in either the gods' domain or their conduct in this world. Thales in the early sixth century suggested the boundary should be moved, arguing that although the gods have certain perquisites in the world, they are not involved in the day-to-day mechanics of the place; they do not cause lightning to strike, for example, or the sun to be eclipsed.[39] He asserted that the

38. Eisenberg, Leon. 1976. "The Outcome as Cause: Predestination and Human Cloning," in *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy,* 1.4: 318–331.

39. See Kirk 1960. Also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A.3, 983b20, where Thales is discussed as the founder of the school that believed water to be the first principle. There is some question about the validity for the tradition that he foretold the solar eclipse that

natural world is subject to its own laws and that describing and understanding those laws are not forbidden to us.[40] He and other presocratic natural philosophers thus began pushing backward the line of demarcation, redrawing it so that more and more information was said to be in the realm of possible human understanding. Aristotle[41] nudged us farther in the same direction, as did the medical scholar Galen and his colleagues.[42] The effort was stalled a few centuries later by forces in Christendom fearful that some knowledge was better left alone, but Aquinas and others spoke loudly in support of the need to let the scientific mind investigate what God had accomplished, at least partly because, following Aristotle, "all human beings by nature desire to know."[43]

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occurred during the battle of the Halys on May 28, 585, but it nevertheless appears in Xenophanes, fr. 19, cf. Herodotus 1.74.

40. Anglin and Lambek 1995. Also Lloyd 1970.

41. Jaeger 1957, part 1. See Allan Gotthelf 1985, *Aristotle on Nature and Living Things*. Bristol: Bristol Classical Press. Also see Allan Gotthelf and James Lennox 1987, *Philosophical Issues in Aristotle's Biology*, Cambridge. Also G.E.R. Lloyd 1973, *Greek Science After Aristotle*, New York: Norton. Also Lloyd 1973, *Early Greek Science: Thales to Aristotle*, N.Y.: Norton.

42. Galen 1985. Also see Edelstein 1967; Owsei Temkin and C. Lilian Temkin, eds., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press; G.E.R. Lloyd 1987, *The Revolutions of Wisdom: Studies in the Claims and Practice of Ancient Greek Science*, Berkeley: University of California Press; P.H. De Lacy 1972, "Galen's Platonism," *American Journal of Philology* 93: 27–39; Vivian Nutton 1984, "Galen in the Eyes of His Contemporaries," in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 58: 315–24; Owsei Temkin 1973, *Galenism: The Rise and Decline of a Medical Philosophy*, Ithaca, New York. For more on this see Arnold Thackray 1972, *John Dalton: critical assessments of his life and science*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

43. Aquinas refers several times and in various contexts to this opening statement of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (980a21) and emphasizes, using three arguments, why the desire to know is a part of the essence of humanity: (1) Each thing naturally desires its perfection, (2) that by which a human being is human is intellect, and (3) knowledge is the actualization of the natural human potentialities. Aquinas concludes on the basis of these arguments that all scientific, systematic knowledge is good. Aquinas discusses this in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics* (1.1–4). A complete discussion of Aquinas on scientific inquiry is in Jan Aertsen's "Aquinas's philosophy in its historical setting," in Kretzmann and Stump 1993, 12–37, esp. 27–28. Also, compare to Maimonidean doctrine (I.51–60) "That such matters are beyond our ken, since they have to do with the free activity of a divinity whose attributes we cannot know," by which Maimonides argues that we can only know what is revealed through nature as the result of divine action, and all else about divinity is outside our ken. A discussion of this is in David Burrell, "Aquinas and

The fifteenth and sixteenth century Renaissance enticed us farther along the path, and then, beginning in the late seventeenth century Enlightenment we enthusiastically set sail straight into the maw of what had been forbidden landscapes. Understanding the natural world, it was said, including the natural parts of human beings, is within our purview, and if God does indeed have a realm of his own, our meddling in this world does not transgress the boundary. Descartes encouraged us in the effort[44] and then in 1687 Isaac Newton legitimized those who had been questioning whether there is a curtain separating our realm from the realm of Aristotle's divine ether.[45] Newton argued that the same laws apply here and there, and so the stars are made of the same substance as the earth. Thus, just as we can gain knowledge of this world, we can begin knowing about Aristotle's divine cosmos. Our reach can indeed go beyond the world, Newton suggested. By 1849, Leibniz was confident enough to declare: "There is nothing in heaven or on earth, no mystery in religion, no secret in nature which can defy the power and efforts of reason."[46]

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Islamic and Jewish thinkers," in Kretzmann and Stump 1993. *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, 1993, Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, eds. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 75. Also see Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, 1995, *Maimonides and St. Thomas on the Limits of Reason*, Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

44. Descartes. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences*. Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, tr., 1911, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartres*. In the sixth part of the *Discourse*, Descartes explains what is needed to advance scientific understanding. He concluded the *Discourse* by saying that, for himself, he will spend the rest of his life employed in nothing but the pursuit of "natural reason," and takes a swipe at ancient ways of pursuing truth by remarking that he hopes "those who avail themselves only of their natural reason in its purity may be better judges of my opinions than those who believe only in the writings of the ancients."

45. In Westfall 1971, 397. Also Ronald Giere "The Skeptical Perspective: Science Without the Laws of Nature" in McErlean 2000, 182. For Aristotle, *On the Universe* 392a5.

46. Leibniz 1998, 4.93ff.

Still, we are not sure. A part of our struggle is that we are in that in-between state where we wonder whether we want Leibniz to be right or not. Each time our scientists take us into new places, we wonder anew whether we are finally trodding on ground so fully within God's purview that his retribution will curse us into oblivion. Icarus learned this, as did those in the Tower of Babel.[47] We are torn between honoring the proscription against forbidden knowledge and a contrary prescription that has equal hold on us—Thales' and Galen's assurance that the universe is a natural entity and that with enough inquiry, observation, and work all of it can and should be understood by the human mind.[48] But the Enlightenment is now 200 years in the past and we find ourselves hurtling toward deeply troubling places.

The angel Raphael says in *Paradise Lost* that there are divinely proscribed kinds of knowledge, things forbidden to humanity. We should admire the handiwork, Milton says, enjoy its glory, even that which appears evil,[49] and stay on this side of the curtain; there is an authority that must be respected and an order of things.[50] As Satan sought to reject that order, the more he accomplished

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47. See below, Genesis, section III.j.

48. On Galen, see Vivian Nutton, ed. 1981. *Galen: Problems and Prospects*. London; Vivian Nutton, 1983, "The Seeds of Disease: An Explanation of Contagion and Infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance," *Medical History* 27: 1–34; Vivian Nutton 1984, "Galen in the Eyes of His Contemporaries," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 58: 315–24; S.M. Oberhelman 1983, "Galen, On Diagnosis from Dreams." *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 38: 36–47. On Thales, see Anglin and Lambek 1995, *The Heritage of Thales*, New York: Springer; Lloyd 1970, *Early Greek Science: Thales to Aristotle*, New York: Norton.

49. Peter Fiore 1981 discusses similarities between Milton's and Augustine's thought on evil as being a part of the goodness of God's creation, and that love and praise of God persists even in hell, esp. pages 21ff.

50. *Paradise Lost* 4.115–17. Raphael consents to tell Adam "what thou canst attain, which best may serve to glorify the maker and infer thee also happier." The issue had been whether and to what extent Adam could seek knowledge. Also, *Paradise Lost* 5.724–28,

his own damnation.[51] Aquinas tells us that there are two kinds of knowledge: scientific and divine.[52] We can probe the depths of scientific knowledge because understanding the creation glorifies God, Aquinas said, but we are to leave divine knowledge to the divine. Hallachic commentators have long adopted a similar position for Judaism.[53] Dorff, for example, argues that rabbis of each generation must be allowed to interpret morality as they understand God's will and that radical innovations in medicine make it more imperative that the rabbis have flexibility in providing guidance about bioethics.[54] That which is to be left to the divine includes establishment of the fundamental principles such as that all human life is sacred and its preservation has priority over other laws. Within the framework of that divine principle, we decide how and when it should be applied.[55] This deciding how and why, however, must be within the framework of

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for a similar proscription directed toward angels who seek knowledge not properly in their domain: "Such a foe is rising, who intends to erect his throne equal to ours . . . hath in his thought to try in battle, what our power is, or our right." Milton, John. 1968. *Paradise Lost*. Alastair Fowler, ed. New York: Longman Inc.

51. A complete discussion of the need to admire and understand God's handiwork while guarding against trying to be like God is in Peter Fiore, 1981, *Milton and Augustine*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 20ff.

52. Kretzman and Stump 1993. Also see Robert Pasnau, 2002, *Thomas Aquinas on human nature: a philosophical study of Summa theologiae* 1a, 75-89. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.

53. Halakhah is that aspect of Judaism concerned with Jewish law. It is distinct from Aggadah, which embraces the non-legal ideas contained, for example, in Mishnah, which is the oral teachings, or Talmud, which is the collection of rabbinic teachings. For example, statements in the Talmud about moral behavior belong to Aggadah, whereas a rule, say, that the victim of an assault has to be compensated in a particular way belongs to Halakhah. In this way, Halakhah is more precise. Halakhic rulings may be based on understandings derived from Aggadah. See Louis Jacobs 1995, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

54. Dorff 1998, 399ff. He goes on to explain that Deuteronomy 17: 8–13 provides that in each generation questions about the law (and hence about what God wants) should be addressed to the judge of that generation (403).

55. Dorff 1998, 409.

intellectual humility, of not trying to know all, which is not humanity's place; it is God's.[56]

It is the lack of intellectual humility that many find dramatically illustrated in Mary Shelley's 1818 story of Dr. Frankenstein's effort to create human life. Dr. Frankenstein begins his work with contempt for those scientists who accepted Aquinas's strictures on eternal life and thereby gave up the quest for immortality and power. He complained that they exchanged "chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth."[57] The doctor longed to find "the secrets of heaven and earth,"[58] to "unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation,"[59] to know not just scientific knowledge of this world, but to reach into God's mind for the secrets of creation. Later, seeing what chimeras of grandeur look like in the light of day, he cautions, echoing ancient warnings from Aeschylus and Euripides:[60] "Learn from me . . . how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow."[61]

Hence the issue here is not whether the boundary shifts, which it does, but rather, what are the sources of our beliefs about the existence of the boundary, and where and how do they show up over time? And then, finally, should we

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56. Dorff 1998, 419, n.9. Also Dorff 1992, 129–48.

57. Shelley, Mary, 1818, *Frankenstein*, 32.

58. Shelley 1818, 23.

59. Shelley 1818, 33

60. Especially Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* (232–45) and Euripides' *The Bacchae* (1150–52, 1325–26).

61. Shelley 1818, 38.

continue to honor them because of beliefs that tradition should be honored, for good or ill, solely because it persists?

I have spoken in this section mostly about the boundaries of information and of understanding the universe. But the boundaries of appropriate human actions raise similar questions, and those boundaries have also shifted over time. As we shall see, Arthur Adkins and others find evidence in ancient stories of the progress of these changes in the moral landscape. At times, the crossing of boundaries in this way refers to seeking god-like power or freedom. Elsewhere it refers to violating divine proscriptions on action. In all of these instances—whether related to limits on understanding or limits on actions—the central thread, the commonality, is that human beings have long been trying to fathom the farthest reaches of what circumscribes their lives. The way this is instantiated in ancient literature show us the seeds that would develop into the way we view these and similar questions.

### *d. Moral understanding in stories*

Telling stories in all the various ways they are told has a venerable history as an effective tool for passing down moral understandings and delineation of boundaries from one generation to the next. Hesiod's *Works and Days* is both an account of everyday life and an indication of values. It tells how evil[62] and work[63] originated in the world and how to understand and escape misery.[64] It talks about

62. *Works and Days*, hereafter *WD*, 59–105

63. *WD* 176–77.

64. *WD* 274ff, 314ff.

various forms of justice,[65] hard work,[66] honesty,[67] and social relations.[68] Hesiod offers guidance on everyday conduct[69] and suggests that we should learn from gods about leading a good life.[70] His *Theogony* tells about the gods who preside over justice and about what that means for humans.[71] The Homeric tales provide a glimpse into the thinking of an aristocratic warrior society that is on the verge of becoming an embryonic democracy with a very different economic system. Largely through Achilleus and Odysseus, Homer[72] suggests that gods and fate, along with luck, together play a significant role in men's lives and that these may be outside the domain of what is properly within human control.[73] This account of the provenance of fortune has not left us; we are still subject to the uncertainty of not knowing the limitations of what is properly within our reach.

The stories—whether from Hesiod, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, or Samuel Clemens—tell us who we are and who we aspire to be. They tell of what is important to us. They tell what we value about being human and point toward those qualities without which we would feel either less human or less of what we

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65. *WD* 9, 39, 213, 217, 219, 221, 230, 250, 254, 262, 264, 272, 712, and elsewhere.

66. *WD* 22–24.

67. *WD* 281.

68. *WD* 328ff.

69. *WD* 293ff.

70. *WD* 1–9.

71. *Theogony* 89ff., 121ff., and elsewhere, especially at 217ff the description of the birth of the fates (Klotho, Lachesis, and Atropos), who "bestow upon mortals their portion of good and evil," which controls the transgressions of both men and divinities. It is these, too, who "never remit their dreaded anger until whoever has done wrong gives them satisfaction" (221ff.). Also see the *Iliad* 24.527–33 on the urns that contain fated suffering and happiness.

72. This is discussed in detail in section 3, the *Odyssey*.

want to be. They give us just enough knowledge to see glimpses of our weaknesses and enough ambiguity to sometimes mistake weakness for strength.

Aristotle suggests that stories are needed to supplement philosophical ideas when he argues that abstract ideas of goodness are not enough, that what is needed are practical ideas of specific goods or evils that can be seen or felt or otherwise experienced in this life.[74] From ancient Greek tragedy to medieval religious plays to Shakespeare and to Walker Percy and Isaac Bashevis Singer, stories speak about the immediate social and private concerns of an age and a culture; they provide Aristotle's "specific goods or evils" and, looked at historically, they show how the values of each period fit into the cultural continuum. This might be thought of as somewhat like the method employed in the Jewish tradition by Halakhic commentators who look at how things have been thought about in the past to determine how we ought proceed today.

To say, as I just did, that 'stories speak about the immediate social and private concerns of an age and a culture' should raise the same cautionary concern expressed elsewhere in this dissertation: because stories are culture-bound, the likelihood is that the moral code articulated in them may inescapably be centered on justifying existing power and ideology. It might be as Fredric Jameson explains in the following, that 'what is good is what belongs to me:'

> . . . as Nietzsche taught us, the judgmental habit of ethical thinking, of ranging everything in the antagonistic categories of good and evil (or their binary equivalents), is not merely an error but is objectively rooted in the inevitable and inescapable centeredness of every individual consciousness

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73. See below, section III.c, the *Odyssey*.

74. *Nichomachean Ethics* 1140a24ff. Hereafter *NE*.

> or individual subject: what is good is what belongs to me, what is bad is what belongs to the Other (or any dialectical variation on this nondialectical opposition: for example, Nietzsche showed that Christian charity—what is good is what is associated with the Other—is a simple structural variant of the first opposition.[75]

But I will argue in chapter II.e that while a moral code and the canonic literature that expresses it can be used to suppress difference and heterogeneity, this does not have to be the only use to which stories are put. The idea that stories can be a valuable tool when employed in discussions about values is the thesis of much of Martha Nussbaum's work.[76] She asks about the connection between on the one hand the philosophical methods and cosmologies of Plato and Aristotle and on the other the depiction in Greek tragedy and other stories of practical dilemmas in human life. She argues, following Aristotle, that both genres are necessary to the full understanding of human life.[77] Similarly, Bernard Williams,[78] Baruch Brody,[79] along with Edmund Pellegrino, David Thomasma,[80] and others claim that secular and religious literature provide guideposts for the practical dilemmas of health care and genetic manipulation.

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75. Jameson 1981, 234.

76. Nussbaum 1990, 1983, 1986, and 1994.

77. She defends the position taken in her books from an attack by Richard Posner in "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism," in *Philosophy and Literature*, 1998, 22: 343–365. Also Richard Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," in *Philosophy and Literature*, 1997, 21: 1–27, and "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two," in *Philosophy and Literature*, 1998, 22: 394–412. Allen Dunn, 1990, argues that her position is not shared by many modern interpreters of literature.

78. Williams 1973 and 1995.

79. Brody 1990 and 1988. A reply to Brody's resurrection of Locke's view is in Charles Taliaferro 1992, "God's Estate," in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 20.1, 69–92.

80. Pellegrino and Thomasma 1993.

In the Greek, Jewish, and Christian lineages, humans acquire some kinds of knowledge only over the objections of gods. The stories say they sometimes recklessly acquire the intellectual means by which they can seek understanding of the universe and the technological skills with which to master it. In the Greek tradition, Prometheus is the means by which humanity obtains knowledge that previously was limited to gods. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Genesis stories explain humanity's overstepping divine boundaries. The sacred literature provides the added dimension of combining creation stories and concepts of the divine as well as providing over time the impetus for stories of family and social development. They show the changing way we came to view ourselves as a part of a larger experience. Genesis, for example, and the story of Job, are attempts to understand archetypal patterns of value in that they raise questions about God's place and humanity's place as well as demarcate the limits of what they claim we should know. In each tradition, the gods act quickly to stop further incursions, especially into the secrets of immortality. The cautionary edicts of gods in the Greek, Christian, and Judaic narratives are the foundation for fears that further incursions may bring catastrophes. Seeking immortality may be a tempting goal, they say, but beware of what you wish for.

This dissertation concentrates on ancient Greek stories because I believe it is there that we find the early formation in the West of this culture's perception of itself, both in the ways we think we are and the ways we would like to be. If we can begin to see how and perhaps why these ideas developed, we could kindle understanding into how we may want to proceed, perhaps what we would like to become and what we would not like to become. I also consider the Genesis story

of the Judaic and Christian traditions because it suggests convergences with and divergences from the Greek tradition as Western cultural attitudes developed.

*e. Stories portray moral image, reveal "thicknesses"*

By looking at certain of our culture's stories it is possible to see where there are convergences of moral beliefs. This sort of convergence can be thought of in the way Bernard Williams says that some ideas become "thicker" to the degree that other ideas converge with them. He argues that the thicker the idea, the more justified we are in claiming that it is a socially objective concept.[81] Thomasma says these thicknesses of experience, "remain time and culture bound, but as they pass from century to century they acquire a validity that approaches 'objective' truth. In my view, this is the greatest and only form of 'objectivity' that ethics can approach. . . ."[82]

Nussbaum argues that our judgments are made in concrete situations and that stories encompass the particularities of those situations in a way that reasoning processes such as consequentialism and deontology do not.[83] She follows Aristotle, who regards *Oedipus* and other poetry as speaking of what is universally true: "Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singulars."[84]

81. Williams 1985, 129, 140–145, 163, 192, 200.

82. Thomasma 2000, 83.

83. Nussbaum 1993, 71. Also Nussbaum 1990, 3ff.

84. *Poetics* 9.1451b4–5.

J. L. Mackie argues that "there are no objective values,"[85] which may be true in the sense in which he makes the claim, but it does not mean that we have neither generally accepted moral beliefs nor beliefs founded in the objective experience of human existence. Williams's thicknesses, for example, when viewed together over time, may be seen as developing into what Putnam calls the "moral image" of ourselves, a kind of conceptual map of our culture's valuational scheme. Putnam describes moral image as "not a declaration that this or that is a virtue or a right . . . (but) rather a picture of how our virtues and ideals hang together with one another, and what they have to do with the position we are in."[86]

In this sense, the views of Mackie and Putnam coincide: morality is invented over time. But as it is invented over time and out of experience, it has the force of objectivity in that moral ideas become a part of our feeling and thinking selves. While perhaps lacking universality among all of humanity and without either eternal existence for any one group or absolute demonstrability, they nevertheless are almost unshakeable within a culture. Their grip on us is most apparent in the stories we tell about ourselves. The convergence of ideas found in the stories points to thicknesses and the thicknesses taken together point in turn to the moral image of ourselves. This does not deny entirely the validity of MacIntyre's observation that in our pluralistic culture we lack shared moral assumptions and that as a result value claims become merely "pure

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85. Mackie 1977.

86. Putnam 1987, 37ff, 51. Also see Putnam 1990, 211ff.

assertion and counter-assertion."[87] Instead, I claim only that in those places where the thicknesses get thickest, we can find some small indication that there are certain beliefs most of us share about what we value in our conceptions of ourselves, at least for a period of time, and in this one culture. At our best, these valuations develop so as to expand rather than shrink moral encompassment.

*f. Justice (dike) and related boundaries*

Because one of the tasks of our stories is to ferret out where we should go and where we should not, stories show the ways in which ideals 'hang together' and what happens when those ideals are violated. One way of violating an ideal is to overreach human limitations by pursuing what only the gods should pursue—or what should not be pursued at all. But this is not a discretely contained topic in the lineage of the West's stories and ideas. Discussion of this boundary must necessarily bleed into related boundary problems. It would be unsatisfying, for example, to speak about the human/divine boundary without also speaking about the line at which human laws are said to transgress on areas properly delimited by the divine. Sophocles' *Antigone* speaks to one aspect of this in asking whether Creon oversteps the boundaries of human law when he issues orders that Antigone believes violate divine laws.[88]

The veil between mortality and immortality is also related to this project, and speaks to issues of limits on extending life. This boundary may also be related metaphorically to questions about whether our curiosity leads us into areas properly attended by divinity. The crossing of categories is applicable as

87. MacIntyre 1981, 8.

well, in that there may be constraints on the crossing of humans and other beings in issues such as xenotransplantation. These elements—the various ways boundaries are discussed—are coextensive with issues of human/divine realms; they contribute to arriving at a picture of the lineage of how we think about limits.

For the ancient world especially, discussion of crossing boundaries is contained within the larger issue of justice, *dike*, and so in chapter III I consider carefully how ancient stories depict justice as being done or not done in relationship to whether we overreach proper limits. Scholars disagree about how Greeks defined justice, especially on when it came to include a moral component. By the early fourth century[89] Plato's *Republic* clearly delineates justice as a moral concept, but for Homer, Hesiod, and others in the Archaic period (roughly from the eighth through sixth centuries), it was largely a legal and political concept, although with at least suggestions of moral implication.[90] Justice operates in these sources on the human, divine, and cosmic levels as a claim about "what is right," which Shirley Darcus Sullivan argues can be thought of as "what is just"

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88. *Antigone* 21ff., 450ff.

89. Because I refer mostly to the ancient period, hereafter assume BCE for all dates unless otherwise noted.

90. Arguing for a strictly legal conception of *dike* during the archaic period are Michael Gagarin ("*Dike* in Archaic Greek Thought," *Classical Philology*, 1974, v.69, 186–97, "Dike in the Works and Days" *Classical Philology*, 1973, v.68, 81–94); Eric Havelock 1978; Havelock and V.A. Rodgers 1971. Those finding a moral component to *dike* in Homer, Hesiod, and others include Arthur Adkins 1960, Werner Jaeger 1945, and Hugh Lloyd-Jones 1983. More recently, Tandy and Neale 1996 argues that it is in Homer, but not in Hesiod that *dike* has moral force and refers to proper or just behavior. But they say Hesiod uses derivatives of *Dike*, such as *dikaios* and *adikos* to refer to a moral force that can be translated as "just" and "unjust."

or what is a "due share" or "due portion" for both gods and humans.[91] In the presocratic philosophers, justice is often the divine or ruling principle of the universe, which acts as a pattern for human justice. Ideas about justice show up in words other than *dike*, and so the concept will arise again and again in discussions of Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, and others. "Justice," *dike*, in all its connotations and formulations is the concept that explains and demarcates "boundary." The opposite of *dike* is *hybris*, which figures prominently in Homer, Hesiod, and Aeschylus as arrogance or pride that leads to a reckless disregard for the claims of others, a disregard for *dike*.[92]

The boundary between human and divine may also be thought of as the boundary between natural and supernatural. Isaac Newton believed that the laws of nature hold for the entire universe, including God's realm; everything constituted the natural for him, including his studies of mysticism and alchemy. In an unpublished draft of Query 31 of the *Optics*, written around 1705, Newton says of the laws of motion: "If there be an universal life and all space be the sensorium of a thinking being who by immediate presence perceives all things in it, the laws of motion arising from life or will may be of universal extent."[93] Ronald Giere asserts that in other writings Newton made the medieval distinction between what is necessary for God's creations and what is necessary for the deity itself. "Both Descartes and Newton were 'voluntarists,'" Giere

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91. Sullivan 1995, 175.

92. M. Dickie discusses hybris in "*Dike* as a Moral Term in Homer and Hesiod," *Classical Philology*, 1978, 73.99, Jaeger, *Paideia*, 103, 168, and Havelock, Greek Concept, 85, 185–7. This subject is covered helpfully in Kerrigan 1990, 20–21 (*Oresteia*), 35 (*Oresteia*), 91 (*Medea*), 120 (comparison with justice in Genesis), 365 (*Hecuba*).

93. In Westfall 1971, 397. Also see Giere 2000, 182.

explains, "in that they believed God could have chosen other laws for the world. Descartes notoriously even held that the laws of arithmetic and geometry could have been different if God had so willed."[94] Newton argued that while the laws may be contingent, and thus could have been different if God had so willed, it is the case that God apparently mandated that the same laws apply in heaven and on earth.[95]

The rise of the experimental method has tested our willingness to follow Milton's, Frankenstein's, and Aquinas's dicta about limits. At what point, we wonder, do we enter into the inquiry that aspires to become greater than our nature will allow? Is it in creating humans without the benefit of sexual reproduction? Transgenic manipulations? J. Robert Oppenheimer thought he might have entered the forbidden by creating the atomic bomb: "We thought of the legend of Prometheus, of that deep sense of guilt in man's new powers."[96] The struggle between what we create and who we want to be seems to arise again and again. When we began implanting fetal pig brain cells into human brains, was that the act that will be the last straw holding god's impatience at bay? We are susceptible to a dangerous arrogance in our ability to convince ourselves that because we are able to do something, we should—especially when we think good will come of it.

The claim for absolute, or mostly absolute, boundaries is related to a Platonic position that is opposed by Aristotle. Plato argued that the good exists

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94. Giere 2000, note 7, 182.

95. Also see note 39 above.

96. Oppenheimer 1947, 193.

independently of what human beings think or do; the absolute forms are mostly unattainable by human striving. Christianity was markedly influenced by this idea, especially in the theology of Augustine, and then of Protestants who believed that the good and God's grace is radically independent from human ideas and wishes. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato's myth refers to souls approaching the boundary of heaven where, "of that place beyond the heavens," are located the absolute forms of ethical ideas, of justice, temperance, knowledge—"the veritable knowledge of being that veritably is" rather than "knowledge that is neighbor to becoming and varies with the various objects to which we commonly ascribe being. . ." These forms are eternal and do not change. The gods see and understand them completely. Our souls see less clearly.[97]

Boundaries, on Plato's account in the *Phaedrus*, are specifically demarcated. Right behavior and proper choice are based on an unchanging line separating what is good from what is not. Those whose lives have held to the good, will—after the death of the body—be "borne aloft by Justice to a certain region of the heavens, there to live in such manner as is merited by their past life in the flesh" while the others "are taken to be punished in places of chastisement beneath the earth."[98] This is profoundly different than Aristotle's claim that ethics seeks the good of the human being and is entirely an account of human life as we experience it. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that wanting to live as a god is wishing for a life that cannot be lived by a human being; it is thus

97. *Phaedrus* 247c–248e.

98. *Phaedrus* 249a.

incoherent, and is certainly not good for us because our nature differs from that of the gods.[99]

Chapters III and IV will consider in more detail the nature and implications of all the boundaries I have mentioned: the boundary we cross when overreaching human limitations, or when encroaching divine territory; the demarcation between human law and divine law, between mortality and immortality, the natural and the supernatural, and between justice and injustice. But first, chapter II seeks to justify using stories to gain understanding about boundaries and about the values employed in claims about proscribed limits.

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99. *NE* 1159a1ff, 1166a15ff.

## Chapter II: Justification

Summary

In this chapter, I discuss in more detail many of the topics raised in the previous chapter. This will include explication of how stories give us information about the moral image we have of ourselves. I also consider the ways in which stories are used to establish cultural identity. The ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry is examined, partly to show that stories give us moral understanding in a way that the usual manner of philosophical discourse cannot. This chapter also explains why stories from antiquity can be employed to gain more understanding about current issues. Finally, I suggest a possible method by which the culture's canonic stories can be plumbed for the kind of moral understanding that is not merely identification of values that have persisted. Instead, I argue that literature can be used to see more clearly those enduring values that have enabled the continuation of ideologies harmful to human well-being, as well as those that contribute to human thriving. In this way we can begin to see both the limitations of persistent values and the possibilities offered by the best of them.

I argue that stories point to our moral beliefs and that one of the functions of certain narratives is to hand down from generation to generation what has been learned about moral obligations and values. This claim rests on the presumption that looking at stories will lead to the moral thicknesses spoken of by Williams and to the moral image suggested by Putnam. If this is true, they are,

as Mary Warnock claims, "perhaps the most important vehicle through which values, the nice and the nasty, the terrifying or the cozy, are conveyed."[100]

This will be, following Aristotle, "generally for the most part true."[101] It does not mean that stories consistently, and universally converge in certain moral values. Many stories can be found that contradict one another, and indeed that argue against a collective moral image at all. Some stories argue fiercely against any boundary between the human and divine realms, that, following Protagoras, man is the measure of all things.[102]

The Promethean model of rebellion is always close at hand, weaving its way through stories as a counterpoint to divine ownership and control of the universe. It would therefore be nonsense to claim there is neither variability nor uncertainty of interpretation. For example, in the story of Abraham and Isaac,[103] in which Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son, the value traditionally drawn from the story is obedience to God: While God's commands may at times be unfathomable to humans, they are still God's commands and must be obeyed because we cannot know God's mind—which was Agamemnon's position when he sacrificed his daughter. Others argue that, no, the story depicts Abraham's failure to question God—again paralleling the questions raised by the Iphigenia episode. This argument holds that God's mind, whatever that is, perhaps can be

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100. Warnock 2001, 111–24.

101. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b21.

102. *Cratylus* 386a: "For he (Protagoras) says that man is the measure of all things, . . ." *Theaetetus,* 152a: ". . . man is the measure of all things—alike of the being of things that are and of the not-being of things that are not."

103. Genesis 22: 1ff.

known and Abraham should have argued with the command, should have complained that the command was so entirely outside the parameters of goodness that Abraham was obligated to resist.

For either reading, the central issue in interpreting the story is the location of the boundary demarcating human limitation. Are there times God should be questioned? Does God sometimes overstep his limits? Are there limits? Where is the line drawn? Is seeking to understand God a forbidden task? Plato raised a similar question in the *Euthyphro* when he asks whether something is good because Zeus or the gods say it is good or whether the gods say it is good because it is good.[104] Before the modern period, this question was answered mostly by claiming that what God commanded was necessarily good. Beginning with the Enlightenment, a more secular society began shifting to acceptance that God's pronouncements are rooted in a justice or a Good that underlies both human and divine realms, which suggests—if the same laws indeed apply to both—that in some matters the curtain between the two does not exist. This marked a change in a valuational scheme that was no doubt furthered and described in stories of that period.

My claim that certain stories we tell describe a boundary between the human and the divine—or the natural and the supernatural, or justice and injustice—presupposes that stories tell us something about values. The justification for and limitations on this presupposition follow in II.a, *Stories as a reflection of a moral image*. In II.b, *Stories and cultural identity*, I examine the ways stories are used to creat cultural identity. The following, II.c, *The ancient*

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104. *Euthyphro* 5dff.

*quarrel between philosophy and poetry,* is a more specific effort to justify using literature to fully understand philosophical concepts. Part II.d, *Using ancient sources for modern understanding,* argues that we can use ancient material—Greek, Judaic, and others—to shed light on modern issues. The last section of this chapter, II.e, *Learning from literature,* suggests a method by which we can read stories that may help us determine which values found in canonic stories are worth keeping, and which are not.

### *a. Stories as a reflection of a moral image*

Mary Warnock describes the importance of looking at stories by using an argument from C. S. Lewis's essay "On Stories," in which Lewis says that certain central values are pointed to most clearly and become immediately intelligible in stories such as Jack the Giant-Killer.[105] Lewis says the tale conveys a tangible understanding of the terror induced by having an experience of the monstrous and Warnock argues that what Lewis does is to point to places where value words are made tangible in the telling of stories:

> . . . there must be some connection between our various uses of a value word, 'terrifying' for example or 'honest', so that we can recognize instances of the concept and understand the situations in which the word is intelligibly used. But this does not entail the prior possession of a fixed and immutable value. It is rather that individual occasions and instances exemplify for us an instance of the value. We evaluate the instance, in the context of the historical use of the word. It is the function of imagination to see this general concept in the particular instance. And this entails further that to use and understand a value word, such as 'terrifying' or 'honest' is to make use of a shared concept. To write or tell a story, whether Jack the Giant-Killer or Anna Karenina is to show that you assume an understanding of its 'point', the significance it contains; or at least that you believe that in telling the story you will cause your readers to understand the point through sympathy with the characters . . . The

105. Warnock 2001, 118–119.

> background of a language which ascribes values to things is a shared humanity, a shared 'form of life'. This does not entail total conservatism with regard to values. But it does entail continuity. . .[106]

Warnock adds that what we value may change and the reasons we give for liking or disliking things may change, but that we remain the same species and that our moral sensibility is made possible by the exercise of imagination. This is accomplished by sharing our likes and dislikes, sorrows and pleasures in the telling of stories about our lives and the lives of those we imagine.

Warnock cites Hume's theory of morality as furthering the idea that it is in the shared notion of a moral sensibility that we come to understand ourselves and what it is that brings value and disvalue to our lives. Morality, Warnock says, may be dependent on our own sentiments of pleasure and pain, but it also is "founded on sympathy and our ability to be moved by the pleasures and pains of other people."[107] On Hume's account, it is not just any sentiment of pleasure or pain that 'denominates an action virtuous or vicious'. . . 'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest that it causes such a feeling or sentiment as denominates it morally good or evil.'[108] For Warnock, the crucial words in this passage are 'without reference to

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106. Warnock 2001, 118.

107. Warnock 2001, 118.

108. Hume, David, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, 3.3.1. Hume begins this section with the observation that "moral distinctions depend entirely on certain peculiar sentiments of pain and pleasure." In conversation, Richard Aquila says that halfway through the section Hume concludes that it is necessary to recognize the role of a certain sort of self-correction with respect to our sentiments, whereby we "correct the momentary appearances of things, and overlook our present situation." Specifically, in judging of personal character, "we overlook our own interest in those general judgments."

our particular interest'. "What I may want for myself is irrelevant to my judgment, if that judgment is to be properly described as moral."[109]

Warnock explicates a justification for looking at stories to find what we as a community believe are the most important values to be passed along, from person to person and generation to generation. Thus she says:

> . . . human beings are very like one another, will like and dislike, broadly the same sorts of things, and, being possessed of imagination can share, understand and take seriously the likes and dislikes of people other than themselves. But it is also necessary to face the fact that human beings, though possessed of these unique gifts of imagination and sympathy are naturally prone to selfishness and greed, to seeking goods and power for themselves at the expense of others. The development of a moral sense in an individual, or the invention of a moral system for a society is the founding of systems, institutions and sentiments which will mitigate human selfishness . . .[110]

Similarly, Gary Wihl employs Rorty, Kundera, and Nussbaum in his project contrasting "the moral significance of detailed, richly descriptive vocabularies" with the ascetic language of philosophy, which does not permit the irony required for "perspicuity in the areas of ethical conflict and competing social agendas."[111]

Wihl says the way we best develop an understanding of the Aristotelian notion of virtuous character is not by reading *Nichomachean Ethics*; it is by reading Homer.[112] To get a visceral feeling for the virtues of moderation or familial obligations or avoiding the seductions of immediate gratification, for

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109. Warnock 2001, 119–120.

110. Warnock 2001, 121.

111. Wihl 1995, 6.

112. Wihl 1995, 27.

example, read the passages in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus refuses Calypso's offer of immortality and instead chooses to continue his journey home to be with his wife.[113] Or listen to what Homer says when he talks about Odysseus's men in the Land of the Lotus-Eaters:

> . . . any of them who ate the honey-sweet fruit of lotus was unwilling to take any message back, or to go away, but they wanted to stay there with the lotus-eating people, feeding on lotus, and forget the way home. I myself took these men back weeping, by force, to where the ships were, and put them aboard under the rowing benches and tied them fast, . . .[114]

Leon Kass used the cautionary power of stories by asking members of the President's Council on Bioethics, which he chairs, to read Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark."[115] The story is about a scientist, Aylmer, who loves his wife but kills her in the attempt to remove her single imperfection, a birthmark on her left cheek. He became so obsessive he tried to bring to bear all his learning and resources to remove the flaw, whatever the cost. Kass used the story because he understands, like Kierkegaard, that there are limits to what philosophical discourse can describe. Kierkegaard argued that there are subjective matters that are important, but which cannot be stated directly, only indicated.[116] In this way, poetic discourse can say what philosophy cannot. In later writings, even Sartre, who in 1947 dismissed poetry as "harmful,"[117] came to agree with Kierkegaard. By 1965, Howells asserts that Sartre wrote that poetry is a less direct way of revealing understanding and so is an essential element of

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113. *Odyssey* 5.43ff.

114. *Odyssey* 9.94–100.

115. See http://www.bioethics.gov/meetings/200201/intro.html.

116. Kierkegaard 1992.

117. Sartre 1947, in Howells 1990, 140.

reflection, revelation, and disclosure, and thus "changes the nature of our relations to the world and ourselves.[118]

Nussbaum and Wihl argue that the philosophical use of stories leads to an expansion and understanding of certain deep truths of human lives, and that while the Socratics may argue that the truths were arrived at by procedures they would find untrustworthy (as we shall see later in this chapter, II.c), their veracity is suggested by how clearly we see these truths hanging within the larger web of a culture's life. The Greeks understood this. They viewed the stories as the embodiment not just of accounts of great events and deeds, but as the embodiment of those values and concerns most central to the community.

Segal says the Homeric epics in particular "provide models for heroic behavior and for the ideal warrior and ruler, especially in an aristocratic society."[119] The tragedies and comedies, too, were so important in this sense that the entire citizen body attended civic festivals to watch them. They may have been the one civic event that women were allowed to attend.[120] Not merely an excuse for gathering, however, they were, as Segal puts it, "a kind of mirror in which the city can view itself from the perspective of the whole heroic tradition and the values, ideals, and modes of behavior crystallized in the myths."[121] In this sense, they were a communal and individual effort to examine justice and

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118. Howells 1990, 146.

119. Segal 2001, 19.

120. By the early fourth century women did attend the dramatic festivals; the evidence is inconclusive for the period before that, but it would be at least somewhat odd if they were not there given the important roles women had in the plays. See Jeffrey Henderson (1991, 133ff.) who argues they did attend the theater.

121. Segal 2001, 19.

injustice, good and evil, punishment and responsibility, the cause of suffering, and the nature and power of gods. These are issues that arouse complex and heated emotions, as when we feel that one more step in some direction will violate the gods' final line in the sand. But this is precisely what Nussbaum says is needed in moral philosophy, an understanding of and a deliberate expressing and arousing of emotion.[122] She says emotions are not simply "blind surges of affect, nonrational forces that push or pull the agent, apart from thought and discrimination. Instead they are highly discriminating elements in the personality, very closely linked to beliefs about the good, about what is worthwhile and what is not."[123]

In western philosophy, Nussbaum argues, the view often is that emotions should be dismissed, not merely because they are not rational, but also because, in the case of emotions generated by tragic drama, they are at least partly created by faulty judgments. As we shall see in examining Plato's argument against using tragic drama, some argue that those judgments are not merely faulty, they are dangerously false.

In her study of the psychology and philosophy of moral decision making, Sidney Callahan also says that prevalent in the Western moral tradition has been a "dismissal and neglect" of emotion. She asserts that ". . . an exclusive focus upon analytic methods of rational moral decision making and the content of arguments wrongly ignores the self who is inevitably informed and shaped by emotions, tacit personal knowledge, intuition, imagery, developmental history,

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122. Nussbaum 1993, 51ff. Also Nussbaum 1990 and 1994, throughout.

123. Nussbaum 1993, 52.

and group experience."[124] Passions, emotions, feelings, and desires were "judged to be arrayed adversarially against reason and to rebel against the higher nature of the soul." Much of Callahan's project is to challenge this rejection of the importance of emotions in moral decision making. Like Nussbaum, and following C. S. Lewis,[125] Callahan argues that it is in literature that we find "abiding moral truths."

That we may find abiding truths does not mean those truths should continue to abide. David Parker, a literary critic who is part of the movement in critical studies to use ethical theory in its analysis of literature, speaks to the issue of using stories not just to define our moral image but to recognize the limitations of that image and alter it to fit a more pluralistic conception of the good.[126] His thesis that the reader should actively use stories to understand the limitations of society is discussed in more detail below, in II.e.[127]

In a manner similar to what Parker suggests, it is by way of stories that we can best experience qualities of other people. By experiencing their way of being in the world, we can incorporate that into our moral image in a way that expands our moral encompassment of others. Cordner explains this role for imaginative literature by arguing for the ability of stories to reshape our lives by understanding more about other lives:

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124. Callahan 1991, 6. He develops this assertion at 115ff.

125. Lewis 1947/1978, 39–53.

126. Parker 1994, throughout, but especially 1–57.

127. Also see Freadman and Reinhardt 1991, 60–95.

> We become engaged by the mode of aliveness whose otherness draws us to it, extending us imaginatively and emotionally—which is to say morally—in our attempts to realise the distinctive character of that otherness in our engagement with it. This involves both our eliciting its relations to our own life—our feelings, values, hopes, fears, loves and needs—and equally an implicit re-shaping of our own life in the opening out of response to the distinctive character of the text's whole mode of aliveness. [128]

In addition to what Cordner says is the capacity to change the way we experience others, stories can be actively read in ways similar to those suggested by Parker, but to affect our emotional responses in such a way that normative judgments are reconsidered. E. M. Dadlez, for example, argues that stories can be morally significant partly because many emotions are linked to evaluative beliefs that can be regarded as normative. Not every emotional response is a moral one, but emotions sparked by a story "can sometimes involve changes in and challenges to our repertoire of normative judgments." In this way, stories can "invite us to imaginatively consider ways in which life could or should be lived."[129] When we reconsider normative judgments, we also redraw our moral image of the world in relation to anger, fear, contempt, resentment, love, pity, and other expressions that may have emotional elements. Ronald de Sousa suggests, similarly, that emotional reactions to stories can form the beginning of new emotional structures, which provide us with new ways of looking at situations with altered moral perspectives.[130] Dadlex describes the way something like this might work:

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128. Cordner 1991, 78.

129. Dadlez 1997, 105ff.

130. De Sousa 1990, 263. Also see Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, 1994, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 121, 96–101.

> A hitherto unconsidered thought might prompt us to call a belief into question or to expose conflicts between one normative judgment and others, leading us to alter or add to our fund of evaluations. Thus . . . fiction can afford unique and sometimes transformative opportunities for insight into our normative appraisals. (This is because) fiction is intended to convey meaning and, ideally, to place the nature of certain kinds of human capacities and experiences into sharp relief[131].

It is not the case that any emotional response to reading a story or watching a play is morally significant. Many are morally trivial. But it does become morally signficant when our response makes us question an existing ethical norm constituted in our moral image. It is also significant when emotional responses substantiate our understanding. Dadlez speaks to this by arguing that "Fictions can have moral significance when what they depict or describe . . . affords a construal of human life and experience that goes beyond the particular fictional objects and events that demonstrate it. . . . (or) a work could simply demonstrate the way that one particular perspective on life and how it should be lived could play itself out."[132]

*b. Stories and cultural identity*

Social anthropologists and others have long looked at the way cultures employ stories to define themselves. They examine primitive societies to see how their stories both support and determine the way people see and speak about their group. Telling stories seems to help make sense of the group's relationship with the rest of the world and to differentiate and define relationships within the

131. Dadlez 1997, 115.

132. Dadlez 1997, 115–16.

group. But understanding what the stories mean and the function they serve in culture is entangled in various definitional problems. Even the idea of what we mean by culture is a knotty issue, and those who study it are aware of the difficulties when they try to sort out the intricacies. In a study of literacy's effect on human culture, Jack Goody asserts that the "soggy language of sociological discourse" makes clarification of phrases like 'the social organization' or 'structure' or 'culture' very difficult. [133] This difficulty of clarification is compounded because scholars make the mistake of applying the same analytical tools to the study of *Oedipus*, Genesis, and even contemporary literature, "with little sense of the basic incongruity involved."[134]

Nevertheless, within limitations, he says there are commonalities. One of these is that the rise of literacy, wherever it occurred, led to changes in relationships and social identity. Secondly, literacy changed the use of stories and other transmitted material in such a way that it became at least theoretically possible to trace later ways of categorizing and understanding back through the lineage to the sources. Finally, literacy led to the development of ways of thinking that resulted in creation of certain fundamental institutions that persist in contemporary civilization. It provided a reference point for individual and social behavior, especially the verbal behavior we think of as symbolic. As we shall see, the result included democratic participation in the community and categories of thought such as Aristotle's logical methods and Locke's subsequent use of Aristotle's division of the sciences. Early on, writing encouraged the growth of magico-religious activity, Goody asserts, so that "just as religious myths become

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133. Goody 1968, 7.

crystallized in the words of the Holy Book, so too magical formulae become perpetuated . . . (and) spread throughout the literate world."[135] These claims reinforce my thesis that we can examine ancient stories to seek understanding about our moral image today, and that literacy contributed to that ability. Had literacy never developed, the oral tradition would over time transmute in such a way that it would be impossible, given sufficient time, to see connections between the distant past and the present.

Some of the foundational work in understanding the employment and effect of stories in cultures was done by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The twentieth century French social anthropologist claimed there are universal facts that are true about the human mind and the way the mind goes about constructing relationships in the world.[136] He was not the first to make claims of this sort. James Frazer made a similar assertion decades earlier in *The Golden Bough*.[137] But Frazer employed a different argument, claiming that because all human beings belong to the same species, there must be psychological universals that should manifest themselves in the occurrence of similar customs among peoples "who had reached the same stage of evolutionary development" all over the world. The difference between that and what Lévi-Strauss argued was that Lévi-Strauss claimed not that there would be this or that custom manifested similarly in various disparate cultures, but rather that the similarity in the human mind occurs at the level of structure. He argued that we may usefully compare the

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134. Goody 1968, 7.

135. Goody 1968, 16.

136. I rely throughout on Leach's explication of Lévi-Strauss's work (Leach 1970).

137. Frazer 1911–15.

patterning of the relations that link together sets of human behaviors, but we will not learn anything by simple comparisons of single cultural items.[138]

His conclusion, after examining primitive societies in South America and elsewhere, was that despite differences in time and place, the structure of primitive thought is present in modern minds.[139] He qualified the assertion in various ways, but always he claimed that it is not helpful to think of the human ego as existing by itself, isolated in time and space. There is no 'I' that is not part of a 'We,' and that each 'I' is a member of many 'We's' that exist over time.[140] Using that claim, he then argued that human beings become self-conscious, and aware of themselves as members of we-groups only when they become capable of employing metaphor (and thus, story) as an instrument of contrast and comparison.

Verbal categories then become what enables humanity to create a mechanism through which "universal structural characteristics of human brains are transformed into universal structural characteristics of human culture."[141] Goody points out that language enabled human beings to achieve social organizations "whose range and complexity were different in kind from that of animals" because social organization was largely learned and transmitted verbally rather than occurring instinctively and genetically transmitted.[142]

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138. Leach 1970, 16.

139. Leach 1970, 16.

140. Leach 1970, 36.

141. Leach 1970, 38.

142. Goody and Watt 1970, 27.

One of the mechanisms employed in social organization is myth, the expression of tradition about the past that is used by nearly all human societies. In this expression, Lévi-Strauss looked for the unconscious nature of collective phenomena—principles underlying myth that point to areas that are universally valid for all human minds.[143] In his way of using it, mythology begins as oral tradition associated with religious ritual, but over time as it is written down and transcribed, it becomes divorced from the original religious context but still retains the essential structural characteristics.

To understand the universal characteristics, Lévi-Strauss asserted that it is necessary to get beneath the recurrent themes of incest, patricide, fratricide, cannibalism, and so forth, and find the structural commonalities. He gets at this by employing some of Freud's claims, including that myths express unconscious wishes that are inconsistent with conscious experience. The hidden universal message in myth is thus usually concerned with the resolution of contradictions. One of these, Leach says, is that among primitive peoples, the continuity of the political system is dependent upon perpetuation of alliances between small groups of kin. These alliances are

> Created and cemented by gifts of women: fathers give away their daughters, brothers give away their sisters. But if men are to give away their women to serve social-political ends they must refrain from keeping these women to themselves for sexual ends. Incest and exogamy are therefore opposite sides of the same penny and the incest taboo . . . is the cornerstone of society.[144]

143. Leach 1970, 54–55.

144. Leach 1970, 57.

Another contradiction is that the concept of life entails the concept of death. What is living is not dead; what is dead is not alive. Leach says Lévi-Strauss thought that one of religion's tasks is to try to separate these interdependent concepts by creating myths accounting for the origin of death, or that claim death is the way to eternal life. New members of a society who hear these myths are being taught by the bearers of tradition to assimilate and understand the way contradictions are resolved. Using the Greek stories about Oedipus, Orpheus, Euridice, and Dionysus, Lévi-Strauss says that one of their functions—as well as that of mythology generally—is to explain publicly the ordinarily unconscious paradoxes of the culture's construction. The public explanation is part of the various elements that go into the making of what Putnam means when he employs the term "moral image."

Leach argues that throughout Greek stories, the common "message" is that "If Society is to go on, daughters must be disloyal to their parents and sons must destroy (replace) their fathers. This is the apparently "irresolvable and unwelcome contradiction." The message sometimes seems to thoroughly contradict fundamentals of human morality, which is why, on Leach's account,

> There are no heroes in these stories; they are simply epics of unavoidable human disaster. The disaster always originates in the circumstance that a human being fails to fulfill his or her proper obligations towards a deity or a kinsman and this, in part at least, is what Lévi-Strauss is getting at when he insists that the fundamental moral implication of mythology is that . . . "self-interest is the source of all evil."[145]

Goody says one generation hands on its cultural heritage to the next partly in the form of ways of acting and as information about natural resources,

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145. Leach 1970, 80.

about cooking food, handling children, and so forth. But transmission is also in the form of ideas of space and time, and the generalized goals and aspirations of the group. The relative continuity of these categories is primarily ensured in an oral tradition by language "in a long chain of interlocking conversations between members of the group," which allows for a direct relationship between symbol and referent. This is sometimes done in everyday interaction, but also occurs in ritual conditions when formalized patterns of speech are employed along with musical instruments and professional remembrancers. As these occur over time, those parts of the tradition that continue to be relevant are told and what is no longer relevant is eliminated in a communal process of forgetting.[146] As we shall see, the emergence of literacy fundamentally changed this process.

When stories are told containing lists, especially when they are genealogies of ancestors such as those in the Pentateuch, the lists are not merely to ensure that names will be remembered. Goody says they serve as mnemonics for systems of social relations. For example, when Jacob delivered prophecies about the future of his twelve sons, he referred to them as the twelve tribes or nations of Israel.[147] The genealogies in Genesis and elsewhere refer on Goody's account to contemporary groups rather than to dead individuals and so serve to regulate social relations among the tribes.

Until they were written down, it is likely that the genealogies changed significantly over time to reflect changes in environment and social situation. The adjustments in the story were made to ensure that the tale continues to carry out

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146. Goody and Watt 1968, 29–31.

147. Genesis 49: 28–33.

its function as a mnemonic of social relationships, rather than merely a remembrance of the past. Further, because they were not faithful historical records of times past, an oral tradition of storytelling allowed the teller to change the tale as social relations adjusted. A similar adaptability was possible in religious transmission. Deities who no longer serve any purpose can easily be dropped from the contemporary pantheon or transformed in meaning or personage. This does not mean transformations were no longer possible in literate cultures. We find in various Greek writers, for example, a range of descriptions of deities and heroes. Prometheus and others were constructed differently, or at least their characteristics and capacities were emphasized in different ways depending upon the context and the teller of the story.[148] But a big difference in pre-literate societies is that the oral tradition tends not to recognize contradictions between what they say now and what they said many years earlier because no records exist for comparison. When stories were written, and maintained as a part of the cultural framework, the result was that myth and history merge into one.[149]

Among reasons we cite for claiming ancient Greece as the source of Western ways of conceiving the world is that it was there, in the eighth and seventh centuries, that alphabetic writing began to allow development of a society that was literate. This changed the whole structure of the way cultural tradition was passed along.[150] Whereas oral societies had been able to forget certain details and thus transform parts of their tradition, literate societies cannot

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148. See below, section III.d., Hesiod.

149. Goody and Watt 1968, 34.

easily discard or transmute the past in the same way. Instead, "their members are faced with permanently recorded versions of the past and its beliefs; and because the past is thus set apart from the present, historical enquiry becomes possible."[151] Hence, while this does not mean the myths and "histories" were unchangeable once literacy spread through the Near East, it does mean the changes were noticed. This awareness allowed analysis and objection by later readers. Hecataeus, for example, who wrote a history of Egypt around 300 claiming Egypt as the source of civilization, said, "What I write is the account I believe to be true. For the stories the Greeks tell are many and in my opinion ridiculous."[152] Hecataeus and others employ the writing of stories in this way to criticize previous myths. Thus Xenophanes in 540 rejected the old fables and replaced the gods of Homer and Hesiod who did "everything that is disgraceful and blameworthy among men" with one supreme god who was very different than the anthropomorphized gods of the past. Similarly, on this account there would be no Darwin had there been no book of Genesis.[153]

As the oral tradition was recorded, there arose—instead of the simple individual adaptations of past traditions—a process of looking at the written stories and evaluating the inconsistencies in beliefs and categories of understanding. This criticism was applied especially to ideas about gods, the universe, and the past. Solutions to the inconsistencies were written and these became the source of further speculation. The effect was that limits were placed

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150. Goody and Watt 1968, 41.

151. Goody and Watt 1968, 67.

152. Goody and Watt 1968, 45.

153. Goody and Watt 1968, 46.

on the arbitrary creation of new stories. The old ones could be questioned and new ways of thinking about them postulated, but they could not be readily forgotten or altered as the stories of an oral tradition could be.

Cultural inheritance in literate culture then becomes composed of two different kinds of material: "fiction, error and superstition on the one hand; and, on the other, elements of truth which can provide the basis for some more reliable and coherent explanation of the gods, the human past and the physical world."[154] But learning which is which is not always readily apparent, and in the *Phaedrus* Socrates criticizes the development of writing because he feared it would lead to a shallow kind of wisdom. He argued that truth can only be found by a process of question and answer in a dialectic between people.[155]

Despite Socrates, literacy spread quickly, and Goody asserts that as it did, the new methods of communication facilitated many of the institutions that would become characteristic of Western culture. For example, literacy enabled development of political democracy in that Greek citizens could read the laws and take an active part in the polis. They were also instrumental in creation of Aristotle's logical methods, as well as his taxonomical categories—both of which, Goody argues, are ways of sorting out the world that could develop only as literacy spread. Aristotle's sorting out became possible because once historical enquiry was employed, skepticism developed not only about the legendary past but also about ideas describing the universe. The next step, Goody argues, "is to see how to build up and to test alternative explanations; and out of this there

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154. Goody and Watt 1968, 49.

155. *Phaedrus* 259e, 276a.

arose the kind of logical, specialized, and cumulative intellectual tradition" that Aristotle inherited.[156] The kind of analysis involved in syllogistic logic, for example, is dependent upon writing. When people can write down statements and dissect them, systems can be formed.

Further, we can recognize in our thought processes the lineage that leads from Aristotle to John Locke's treatment of the forms of argumentation and of the division of the sciences.[157] And so Goody asserts that "in some important ways" the literate culture of the West and of the world can recognize in itself the lineage extending from Aristotle to Locke and to us—a result of the development of literacy. In this way, Goody argues, the debt of contemporary thinking to ancient Greece is the result not so much of the 'Greek genius' as of the development of literacy.[158] An implication of literacy is thus that "certain aspects of the past continue to be relevant (or at least potentially so) for the contemporary scene . . ."[159]

When the Greek poets beginning with Hesiod and the Homeric writers set the stories to paper, the possibility formed that their ways of thinking about family, death, divinity, limits, and relationship would become ours—transmuted by circumstance, but structurally of the same lineage. Then, as now, the stories—whether oral or written—serve social purposes and thus are instrumental in formation of cultural identity. Ruth Finnegan's study of the

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156. Goody and Watt 1968, 67–68.

157. Locke 1959, 4.17: 84.

158. Goody and Watt 1968, 55.

159. Goody and Watt 1968, 66.

effects of oral poetry argues that stories can serve to uphold the status quo, to act as a mythical or sociological charter:[160]

> Court bards strengthen the position of rulers, poets act as propagandists for authority, the accepted view of life is propagated in poetic composition and, when poets are an established group, their own power and interests are often fortified by their performances. The social order is also maintained through the performance of poetry in ceremonial settings, where established groups express solidarity and social obligation in song.[161]

Finnegan says the stories can also be employed to disrupt and alter the social order, as well as in rituals of healing, exerting social sanctions, articulating imagination, and adding validation to ritual and ceremony. They are employed, therefore, in all the possible configurations that lead to creation of identity: to propagandize, conserve, cajole, attack, soothe, remind, and authorize. As such, the "content and context of literature, and the way literary activity is organised are closely correlated with the institutions of the society in which it is situated."

On Finnegan's account, poets play an important part in creating and maintaining cultural unity. In Ethiopia, for example, wandering *azmari* poets helped to create uniformity among otherwise heterogeneous groups, and in early Ireland, poets acted as a national institution where there were no towns or central civic system. The same phenomenon has been observed throughout the world, she asserts, and so it seems clear that "One can neither understand the organisation of literary activity in isolation from its social setting, nor grasp the

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160. Tandy (1997) makes this same point in reference to the use of Hesiodic and Homeric poetry to support changes in economic and social systems during the eighth century. See below, section III.b, the *Iliad*.

161. Finnegan 1977, 242.

functioning of the society without reference to the poetic activity which takes place among its members."[162]

Two schools assert different views of whether poetry develops out of social conditions or poetry is the active and initiating factor in social development. The first suggests poetry as a reflection of environment and social norms. The second sees poetry as a social force. It is not the case, of course, that either is wholly true or false. Poetry both reflects and causes social conditions, and the two possibilities often act synergistically so that it is often difficult to separate the interrelated elements. Because of its effect, the question of who controls the activity of poetry has been important in understanding how it is employed. Tandy, for example, argues that the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and Hesiod's *Theogony* abet "the attempt to disguise recent radical changes in the economic infrastructure" and seek to show that the nonelite will benefit from the changes, or at least should go along without complaint.[163] He says they were used as tools by emerging economically powerful elements to further their ends.[164]

Finnegan supports this view when she asserts that control over poets and poetry has been a "constant preoccupation of those in authority through the ages."[165] Unlike Goody, Finnegan argues that in its various uses poetry affords no clear differentiation of effect whether it is oral or written. She rejects the idea that oral poetry can be distinguished from written poetry in its social context or

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162. Finnegan 1977, 245.

163. Tandy 1997, 191.

164. Tandy 1997, 192.

165. Finnegan 1977, 270.

function.[166] Instead she suggests that the distinction should be viewed more like a continuum than a sharp break between categories. She further questions assertions (perhaps like those of Lévi-Strauss) that claim poetry is the product of social structure or of unconscious urges or the result of deep cognitive and symbolic mental structures that are beyond the poet's power to affect. Instead, she thinks of poetry as the result of an active, imaginative, thinking being. It expresses people doing things and making choices. But,

> 'People doing things' does not just refer to the outward and observable acts by which people organise poetic activity or use poetry to achieve political power, economic reward and cooperation, religious satisfaction, aesthetic pleasure . . . There is also a sense in which they use it to 'create' the world around them.[167]

For the people involved, she asserts, "the nature of the world is what they create and picture it to be in their poetry." She means by this that stories are not just passive repetitions of morality tales and the like. Instead, they are the work of people actively creating the world around them: "It is through poetry—not exclusively, certainly, but surely pre-eminently—that people create and recreate that world."[168]

The arguments of Goody, Lévi-Strauss, Finnegan, and others is that in all their forms and various purposes, stories are the primary element by which individuals and cultures define themselves and transmit their views about what is important to the group. As such, the stories themselves, including the way they

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166. Finnegan 1977, 272.

167. Finnegan 1977, 273–74.

168. Finnegan 1977, 274.

transmute over time, can be used to understand areas of continuing relevance in our efforts to decide how we want to create ourselves in the future.

### *c. The quarrel between philosophy and poetry*

MacIntyre in *After Virtue* claims that ancient debates about words like "good," "justice," and "happiness" set the foundation for all subsequent moral talk in the West.[169] It was in the dialogues that Plato set the framework for one of these debates when he claimed philosophy superior to poetry, which he saw as philosophy's rival in its ability to instruct and describe values. The claimed "old quarrel" between philosophy and poetry was constructed by Plato in the *Republic,*[170] where the boundary first came to be demarcated in an explicit and systematic way.[171]

The visceral feeling evoked by an emotional response to suffering and other actions is among the reasons Plato and the Socratics cite in objecting to the use of certain kinds of poetry in philosophical education. Suspicions about the intent and effect of poetry led Plato to urge banning poets from the education of an ideal citizenry. They based this suspicion partly on their belief that the "irrational" response to poetry was not conducive to rational reflection, but perhaps more importantly on grounds that the representations of poets are an

169. MacIntyre 1981.

170. *Republic* 10.607b.

171. Wilson 1996.

improper use of *pathos* to encourage sacrilege and irrational behavior.[172] Their objection was based on the ancient Greek rather than the modern use of the term. For Greeks, *pathos* was perhaps the most important element in art: the enactment of catastrophic suffering by a great man or god—suffering that is usually not fully deserved. Today, "pathos" is merely the ability to evoke a feeling of pity, compassion, or sadness. But for Plato, *pathos* was an impious evocation of unjust divine action. In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon,* for example, the gods provide men with understanding through *pathos* by causing terrible injustices; it is a device used partly to get one's attention—as when Iphigeneia's sacrifice is demanded in return for providing wind so that the fleet can sail on to Troy[173]—and partly to depict humanity's reliance on the gods, even when one of them acts whimsically.

Plato and the Socratics argue that the gods do not condone injustice and would never cause an injustice (whimsically or not). When tragic poetry suggests otherwise, it is sacrilegious and the tragedians are guilty of encouraging impiety in their audience. Socrates and Plato argue in the *Apology*[174] that nothing can destroy the happiness of a truly good person and that the gods guarantee this. Thus Socrates says we should "refuse to accept Homer's or any other poet's mistake concerning the gods when they err without understanding and say that 'two urns stand on Zeus's threshold filled with fates, one with good, the other

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172. *Republic* 10.605b, 7.540 d–541 a; Also see *Gorgias* 268a–b, where he breaks with his usual condemnation of rhetoric. A full discussion of the quarrel is in Gould 1990.

173. *Agamemnon* 146–254.

174. *Apology* 41 c–d.

miserable.'"[175] Socrates refers to the *Iliad*,[176] where we read that mortals who receive allotments from both urns are sometimes happy, sometimes not, but others, who receive lots only from the urn of unhappiness are outcasts, who live and die in misery. Hesiod has a similar claim—that Zeus provides the good or evil that men experience:

> through him mortal men are equally unspoken and spoken, famed and unfamed by the aid of great Zeus. For easily he makes a man strong, but easily he presses hard the strong; easily he diminishes the illustrious and increases the unknown; easily he straightens the crooked man and withers the arrogant, does Zeus the High-Thunderer.[177]

For the Socratics, this left too much to chance, too much out of the control of the man who properly employed philosophical study. In the *Republic*[178] Socrates complains that the stories told to children teach them to accept the idea of injustices caused by gods and, even when the stories are explained and placed in context, children are more impressed by the story than by the explanation.[179] If one acts badly, Plato suggests, it is because understanding has been diminished by too much misleading poetry and not enough philosophy.[180]

Aristotle hesitates before Plato's assertion that the *pathos* of tragedy is anathema to moral education, but nevertheless accepts part of Plato's formulation. In the *Poetics*, he agrees that a story depicting the suffering of an

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175. *Republic* 379c–e.

176. *Iliad* 24.527–33.

177. *WD* 2–8.

178. *Republic* 387b–c.

179. *Republic* 378d–e.

entirely blameless person would be an impious story, a polluting influence (*miaron*). But Aristotle qualifies this by arguing that a good tragedy always shows that suffering is traceable in some way to the person's failure to act or choose well, and that if the suffering is not at all depicted as the result of the person's improper behavior, then the tragedy's construction is faulty. Departing from the Socratics, Aristotle maintains that a tragedy must show that the suffering is to some degree not deserved because this is the device that generates pity, which is essential to the task of tragedy.[181]

Nussbaum says she understands why Socrates rejected tragic drama: "For tragedy presents reversals of fortune that happen to good people as highly significant, as occasions for emotions of fear and pity that themselves ascribe significance and weight to them." And this, she says, contradicts the claim that the good person cannot be harmed.[182]

Wihl follows Nussbaum in arguing for seeking ethical and philosophical guidance from stories, but Nussbaum goes further, asserting that philosophical training has erred in that it has followed Plato's advice. She says the existing model should be altered. She wants, first, to expand the intellectual activity of moral education to include emotional knowledge. Second, she wants to give priority in moral education "to the perception of particular people and situations,

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180. *Republic* 10.607b–c. Laws 12.967c–d suggests that poets were hostile to philosophers because of their materialistic astronomy, but the "quarrel" in most of Plato clearly refers to the issue of *pathos*. A discussion is in Gould 1990.

181. *Poetics* 13 and 14.

182. Nussbaum 1993, 71.

rather than to abstract rules."[183] The implication of her claims is that Plato's formulation of an ideal education as one that excludes impious poetry from philosophical training is precisely what has been accomplished by the academy—indeed, that the philosophical academy has exceeded Plato's dictum by mostly ignoring all poetry in its educational effort rather than excluding merely the poetry that the Socratics believed was sacrilegious. Plato's fear of employing poetic narrative in moral philosophy has a firm hold on the modern discipline, she believes, and the hold should be broken. Ethics, she says, finds its "most appropriate expression and statement in certain forms usually considered literary rather than philosophical . . ."[184] She insists that we should broaden our conception of moral philosophy:

> . . . there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it—views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty—that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder—but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.[185]

She thus condemns Plato's claims, and, further, argues that the way of telling stories can be as instructive as what is told in the tale:

> The telling itself—the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life—all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not . . . of life's relations and connections.[186]

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183. Nussbaum 1990, 3ff.

184. Nussbaum 1990, 3ff.

185. Nussbaum 1990, 3.

186. Nussbaum 1990, 5.

Nussbaum follows Proust and Henry James in asserting that we err if we believe that the communication of values can, in a mature mind, be accomplished equally well by studying abstract philosophical theory alone. Proust believes, for example, that human values and psychology cannot be understood by intellectual activity alone, by studying only philosophical theory; they can be fully felt and understood only if they are known emotionally, and "knowing emotionally" is best portrayed in stories.[187] Similarly, Nussbaum says that powerful emotions have an "irreducibly important cognitive role to play."[188]

As Nussbaum argues that embedded in literature are the values of a community, so Arthur Adkins argued throughout his career that it is possible to examine value terms in literary and philosophical texts and from them educe some understanding of ancient moral systems.[189] Adkins's assertions are challenged, however, by critics who say that the recurrence of certain values in Homer's epics is not sufficient reason to assume that those same values are widespread in ancient Greek communities.[190] A. A. Long, for example, objects that Adkins

> "finds it perfectly legitimate to interpret many Homeric contexts as if the society which they are claimed to reflect had some autonomous existence, outside the poems. . . In fact, of course, our knowledge of Homeric values is not extended by any sound evidence independent of the *Iliad* and

187. Proust 1981. For more on Proust and philosophy, see Mary Rawlinson, "Art and Truth: Reading Proust," in *Philosophy and Literature* 1982, 6: 1–16.

188. Nussbaum 1990, 7.

189. Adkins 1960. Also Adkins 1971, and elsewhere. Adkins defends his position in "Merit, Responsibility, and Thucydides," 1975, in *Classical Quarterly* 25.2: 209–220.

190. Richard Robinson, review of *Merit and Responsibility*, Philosophy 32: 279; Hugh Lloyd-Jones, The Justice of Zeus, 1971, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2–3; Dover, *Greek Popular Morality*, 46–50; "The Portrayal of Moral Emotions in Greek Poetry," Journal of Hellenic Studies, 1983, 103: 35–48; and Adkins, 1978, "Problems in Greek Popular Morality," in *Classical Philology* 73: 143–158.

> *Odyssey*. Inferences drawn purely from Homer about ethical language cannot be assumed as historical axioms. It would certainly be remarkable if the moral standards found in Homer bore no relation to the life and language of actual peoples. But Adkins makes little or no allowance for the absence of any authoritative historical check on this . . ."[191]

Thirty-two years after Long wrote this, supporters and detractors of Adkins are still debating whether he was justified in educing ancient Greek moral schemes by examining how core value terms seem to be used in stories such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But in a collection of essays honoring Adkins, editor Robert Louden argues that even his opponents concede that he "helped to stimulate the currently burgeoning interest in the relationship between Greek literature and moral philosophy."[192] Further, even if Adkins erred and Homeric values should not be extended to suggest anything about ancient moral beliefs, this would not preclude our drawing understandings from those same literary sources about later periods if it can be shown that there is considerable additional evidence existing in those periods to support the claims.

If Adkins is correct in claiming that examining literary texts provides clues about moral systems, then there should be strong justification for asserting that if ancient literary texts are examined and compared to values found in later works, the confluences that appear may be thought to reflect a society's deeply held beliefs as they develop over time. What we can get from this is at least partly confounded by the problems of commensurability, but all the same there should be sufficiently comparable values from one century to the next to allow claims for a lineage of beliefs. If similar values about loyalty, for example, are found in the

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191. Long 1970, 121–139. Long refers here to Adkins's thesis in *Merit and Responsibility* (1960).

second century as in the third, we can reasonably conclude they are talking about comparable beliefs. And if that continues century after century, the persistence of that value over time probably says something important about how most human beings think of loyalty as a value. This does not mean that the priority we assign to the objects of loyalty—family, state, religion, friends—necessarily remains constant, although it might. It does mean that loyalty can be considered a persistent value in human community, at least for this culture over this expanse of time. It also means that to contravene loyalty would be to significantly alter the nature of human relationship as it has developed.

My project is a part of the interest in the relationship between Greek literature and moral philosophy to which Louden refers, and in it I make only the claim that where over time we find enough recurrence in literature of certain values, it would certainly be remarkable, as Long says, if they bore no relation to our lives. Hesiod thought similarly: "No talk that many people talk perishes completely."[193] Aristotle cites Hesiod's remark several centuries later in his discussion of the pursuit of pleasure as perhaps the chief good because "all things, both brutes and men, pursue pleasure . . ." He claims as part of his reasons for this claim that over time many people have said the same, including Hesiod. Thus, "No voice is wholly lost that many peoples . . . (have repeated)."[194]

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192. Louden 1996, 6. Louden was referring to a statement from Blundell 1989, 5.

193. *WD*, 762–763.

194. *NE* VII.1153b25–28. Nussbaum clarifies her position on this in "Reply to Papers," in Philosophical Investigations 16: 1, 46–86, saying she does not conclude from Aristotle's remark that a universally held view could never be false (78). "What I actually say, on page 248, is that 'nothing universally believed is entirely discarded'."

One of the voices Aristotle cites is Sophocles', who, in *Oedipus*, asks the universal question, Why do our lives turn out to have the shape that they finally have? In his study of *Oedipus*, Charles Segal says the play "brings together the question of how we make sense of our individual lives and how we make sense of our world given the elusiveness of final truth, the mysterious remoteness of the gods, and the slipperiness of language."[195] Oedipus faces this question in reflecting on the world order and in the mystery of his life, and Segal says that for centuries people have found value in the various answers they find in different aspects of the play. The story directly confronts the mystery of a world in which we continue to wonder whether the suffering we find is due to design, to chance, or to something else. We can be cautious about assuming that our values have much in common with ancient values, but what Segal suggests in relationship to *Oedipus* is that, following Aristotle, too many of us for a long time have been seeing our concerns in the general concerns of *OC and OT*.

Nussbaum says both literary analysts and philosophers would profit by using stories as sources of philosophical and ethical insight because that is where they will find the confluence of belief to which Hesiod and Aristotle refer. Literary analysts, she says, should consider philosophical and ethical implications as well as the usual qualities of philology and aesthetics; philosophers should use stories to fill out the abstract ideas of philosophical analysis. This is not how it is typically done. The study of ethics traditionally has tended to learn what was said by the presocratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the sophists, the medievalists, Descartes, Kant, Hume, Sartre, Rawls, and the rest of the canon. When

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195. Segal 2001, 5.

philosophers discuss ethics, it is to these they usually turn, not to Aeschylus, Sophocles, Marlowe, and Faulkner, and that limitation, Nussbaum believes, has impoverished us.[196] The impoverishment is a phenomenon that most ancient philosophers, despite the Socratic complaints, would have found both "unnatural and unilluminating":

> For the Greeks of the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C., there were not two separate sets of questions in the area of human choice and action, aesthetic questions and moral-philosophical questions, to be studied and written about by mutually detached colleagues in different departments. Instead, dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics were both typically framed by, seen as ways of pursuing, a single and general question: namely, how human beings should live.[197]

Dramatic poets like Euripides and Aristophanes were the Athenian ethicists. They, along with Aeschylus, Sophocles, and others provided the forum for the community to examine questions related to how the *polis* should be organized, the role of citizens in the *polis* and in the family, and the good of the *polis* and the individual.[198] The process of teaching and understanding, using both abstract ideas and communal poetry, as well as other methods was referred to as *psuchagogia* (leading of the soul).[199] Later, the Hellenistic period began to develop ideas that literature could be thought about in purely aesthetic terms, without practical purpose.[200] But for the most part the two—aesthetic and

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196. There are exceptions. Donald Davidson taught a seminar class at Stanford during the 1970s for which the reading list included Sophocles, Aeschylus, and several other ancient poets.

197. Nussbaum 1990, 15. Also see Nussbaum 1986, Interlude 1, "Plato's anti-tragic theater," 122ff.

198. A discussion of this is in Segal 2001, especially chapters 2 and 7.

199. Nussbaum develops this idea in "Therapeutic Arguments: Epicurus and Aristotle," in The Norms of Nature, 1985, ed. M. Schofield and G. Striker. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

200. Nussbaum 1985, 32.

practical—were not separable genres for the dramatists. Nussbaum argues that this is as it should be, that the philosophical academy has evolved a practice that focuses on the practical and too often ignores the aesthetic value of literature. The ancient dramatists demonstrate in this way the argument Aristotle would make when he asserted that practical reasoning must be accompanied by emotional knowledge to attain practical wisdom (*phronesis*[201]). For example, he claims that emotional knowledge is that which leads to temperance.[202]

Plato and the Socratics laid siege to this argument, claiming either that emotions are unreliable and irrational, thereby distracting from rational inquiry, or that they are entirely false. The essence of this latter objection is related to Plato's objection to *pathos*, and similarly, to what Nussbaum describes as the objection "that the emotions involve value judgments that attach great worth to uncontrolled things outside the agent; they are, then, acknowledgments of the finite and imperfectly controlled character of human life."[203] Thus Plato's desire for self-sufficiency in moral behavior is compromised by uncontrollable forces, whereas Nussbaum's project is to recognize the existence of uncontrollable forces and find in literature rich depictions of human emotions responding to the vagaries of those forces. She avoids foundationalism concerning the emotions,

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201. *NE* VI.5.

202. *NE* II.4, 1105b1–18ff. Also, Aristotle argues that without emotional knowledge one may act against one's best judgment, a defect he refers to as incontinence. Much of *NE* VII is a response to the problem inherited from Socrates, which Aristotle frames as a problem of knowledge or understanding (episteme): "... it would be strange—so Socrates thought—if when knowledge was in a man something else could master it and drag it about like a slave" (*NE* VII.2, 1145b23–4. Also *Protagoras* 352b–c. Nussbaum's project in *Fragility* is partly a claim that it is in literature that we most clearly understand Aristotle's argument.

203. Nussbaum 1990, 42.

accepting that they can be unjustified or false and that they are not self-certifying sources of ethical truth. Instead, she makes the narrower claim that emotions enrich wisdom.[204] She argues, nevertheless, that it would be wrong to think that "emotions are unlearned or innate."[205] She claims that each emotion involves believing a certain proposition and that these beliefs are acquired largely through socialization. For these reasons, she says, we continue to read tragedies, both Greek and others, because they continue to inform and, as part of the process of socialization, they

> Tell stories of reversals happening to good but not invulnerable people, and to tell these stories as if they matter for all human beings. And the form sets up in its audience responses, particularly those of pity for the characters and fear for oneself, that presuppose a similar set of beliefs.[206]

If as the Socratics would have it a good person is invulnerable to bad luck and suffering, and if goodness can be learned by a philosophical education in abstract intellectual knowledge, then what can be learned from tragedy and other poetry is superfluous. And if this is the case, then tragic poetry, or for that matter any good story, as on Richard Posner's account, has value only to the extent it has aesthetic value. Citing Cleanth Brooks, Tolstoy, Bentham, and George Orwell as similarly minded, Posner says edification is the function of religion "but not of poetry."[207] He says the examples of Wagner, Celine, Pound, Heidegger, and de Man should be cause for skepticism about the edifying effects of education in general "and of literature in particular." Dismissing Nussbaum as naïve, he suggests that we read merely "to enjoy life a bit more."

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204. The full discussion of this issue is in Nussbaum 1990, 42, 261–313.

205. Nussbaum 1994, 79.

206. Nussbaum 1990, 17

Posner mistakes Nussbaum's position on several counts, but most importantly in believing she claims that literature should "produce models of modern moral behavior." Because good literature produces models of all sorts of behaviors, good and ill, Posner says it is not necessary that one consider the moral elements of the story to educe its value. He is helpful in noting that a story's moral position does not determine its value as literature, but he errs in his objection to Nussbaum. Following Aristotle, Nussbaum argues merely that the best of tragic poetry and other stories develop moral understanding. She would not claim Medea as a moral exemplar. She would say that our response to her actions develops in us feelings of compassion, understanding, pity, fear, and questions about appropriate justice, among others.

Nussbaum sums up her views on this in an article responding to critics.[208] She argues that there are views of what human life is and how to live it that cannot be adequately expressed in the form and language of abstract philosophical writing; literature not only completes the expression, it is an essential ingredient of it. She says, for example, that the Aristotelian ethical view, as an alternative to Kantianism and Utilitarianism, is comprised of four theses and that they are best expressed in imaginative literature:

> (a) that there are many intrinsically valuable things in a human life, and that these are not commensurable by any single quantitative standard; (b) that in certain ways . . . particular perceptions are prior to general rules, (c) that the imagination and the emotions are valuable and ineliminable elements in good deliberation; (d) that events of life that lie beyond our control can have serious ethical significance.[209]

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207. Posner 1997, 1–27. Also Posner 1998, 394–412.

208. Nussbaum 1993

209. Nussbaum 1993, 71.

It would not be sufficient to investigate these theses by examining our own lives, she says. Exploring literature is necessary because, following Henry James and Marcel Proust, literature is "the record of the experience of a fully alert and attentive and responsive being—which is not what most of us are most of the time. It thus sees more and better, feels more keenly and deeply, than we usually do."[210] This is why Mary Warnock claims stories are "perhaps the most important vehicle through which values, the nice and the nasty, the terrifying or the cozy, are conveyed."[211]

When philosophy took its positivist turn midway through the nineteenth century, its entrancement with scientific methods and results led to a formulation of its processes that was similar in attempted precision to scientific rigor. Wittgenstein referred to this when he said philosophers "constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does." But, while this tendency is the source of metaphysics, Wittgenstein added, it "leads the philosopher into complete darkness."[212] Ethical thought proceeded using descriptions of systems like that of Spinoza and then like that of the utilitarians, all of which lent a mechanistic tone to the endeavor. The quantitative excesses of Bentham's ethics seemed to be the foundation for the tone even after Mill and others set aside his ideas as too simplistic. In that atmosphere, the uncertainties, irrationalities, and bewilderments that plague human life depicted in literature must have seemed

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210. Nussbaum 1993, 73.

211. Warnock 2001, 111–24.

sufficient justification to doubt that poetry, drama, and novels had a useful place in philosophical understanding. They could depict emotions, certainly, but emotions were an element of human life that should be controlled by reasoned analysis, not looked to for real knowledge. "It is no chance matter we are discussing," Plato warned, "but how one should live."[213] The poets, too, believe that they are writing about how one should live, but they recognize that how one lives often is indeed a matter of chance, and so it is to poetry that we often turn because at its best it may give us deep understanding of what is said in philosophical discourse.

Nussbaum says that certain literary texts and others like them are not just helpful in philosophical inquiry, they are indispensable: ". . . sources of insight without which the inquiry cannot be complete."[214] They are indispensable because they depict in large ways a kind of picture of a way of life that one cannot see by examining alone the doctrines of Spinoza, for example, or Kant, or any combination of abstract philosophical schemes. It is by way of both philosophers' doctrines and poets' words that we can begin to understand Williams's thicknesses and Putnam's moral image. It is what Henry James refers to as becoming "finely aware and richly responsible"[215] such that one develops the practical wisdom of which Aristotle speaks—not merely a mechanistic process of logic but a larger ability to perceive important truths about human life. And by so doing we can begin to understand what has become important about

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212. Wittgenstein 1949/1973, 18.

213. *Republic* 352d.

214. Nussbaum 1990, 23.

215. James 1934, 62.

how we live, how we describe ourselves, how we want to be, and how we do not want to be. We cannot get the fullness of understanding by reading Plato and Aristotle alone that we can achieve by reading *Antigone* along with them.[216]

What I mean by this is what Aristotle and James refer to when they say that in order to understand any single feature (a boundary between the human and the divine, for example), it is necessary to see how that feature is connected to all around it—to its context, to other human activity, to both the concrete and the abstract.[217] Responses to concerns about violating a sacred boundary are emotional responses that evoke feelings of fear, dread, and uncertainty. Hence, the tracing in literature and art of the idea of divine boundaries is also the tracing of an emotional idea.

Responding fully to those (Plato, Posner, and others) who argue against using stories, or some kinds of stories, to develop moral understanding is not

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216. A helpful discussion of Nussbaum's position in reference to literature and philosophy is in Stephen Halliwell, "Philosophy & Literature: Settling a Quarrel?" in *Philosophical Investigations*, 1993, 16: 1, 1–17 (especially page 4 where he asserts that literature and philosophy in the Greek tradition rested on a shared basis of ethical concerns and interests. [in my binding "goodness & fragility"])

217. James 1934, 60; Aristotle refers to this delimiting necessity in various ways throughout *Poetics*, but especially from chapter 9 and following. At 9.1451b30, for example, he urges using the concrete examples of history in the writing of poetry; at 24.1460a.25ff he says "The story should never be made up of improbably incidents" because it is best to use for the plot incidents that are both concrete and probably; at 25.1461a.4ff he says to consider not only the intrinsic quality of a word or deed, but also the actuality of the person who says or does it; at 25.1461a.30ff he discusses the difference between the abstractness of metaphor and concreteness of that to which it refers; also see 3.1448b.5ff where he explains that realistic representations of animals or other things in art make the abstractness of art more "delightful." Bernard Williams discusses aspects of this in reference to the context of friends, family, society in "Persons, Character and Morality," and "Moral Luck" in *Moral Luck; and Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, especially chapter 3.

within the scope of this project. Nussbaum and others do that.[218] My purpose here is to build on their general defense by providing more specific examples for using ancient stories as a source of finding and perhaps understanding concepts and beliefs that are widespread in our culture today—namely beliefs related to the idea that there are boundaries between the human realm and the divine realm and that it is thought that fearful consequences loom when humans transgress that boundary.

If we were to follow the Socratic suspicion that poetry is not to be trusted because it evokes unreliable, even impious, emotions, then my project would be moot. I argue, however, that the belief exists that there are proscriptions against violating certain boundaries and that it is an important part of our view of ourselves. Understanding this view is essential to making decisions about how we should proceed in any endeavor. And the only hope we have of a truly developed understanding is to experience, by way of literature, the playing out in people's lives of the ideas talked about by Plato, Kant, Rawls, and the rest. When the endeavor is as important as the integrity of the human genome and its future evolution, it behooves us to pay close attention to all possible sources of moral insight.

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218. See especially Stephen Halliwell (1984), who argues in support of Nussbaum's claim that moral understanding is best developed by a combination of philosophical analysis and the use of poetic literature. He discusses and tries to refute Plato's argument that poetry tends to be harmful. In "Plato and Aristotle on the Denial of Tragedy," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 30: 49–71.

*d. Using ancient sources for modern understanding*

It can be argued that incommensurability precludes making claims about even the thinnest commonality among values, thereby injuring the chances that stories from the past can help us understand modern issues or make decisions about modern dilemmas. There are traps to avoid in such an effort, but they are not sufficiently dangerous that in attempting to avoid them we should set aside all efforts to understand the present by examining the past.[219] Bernard Knox argues regularly and fiercely for the continuing value of ancient literature:

> The great writers are of course of an age, but also for all time. . . The masterpieces of our literature retain their hold on the mind and emotions of generation after generation. Created for their time, they outlast it, winning new readers and audiences in a world unimaginably different from their own. They can still move us to tears or laughter, shock or beguile us; they remain contemporary because they present us with a unique vision of their own time that addresses our own deepest hopes and fears. They often seem more powerful, more meaningful, more modern than what is being written by and for our age.[220]

Matthew Arnold hoped: "If the instinct for beauty is served by Greek literature and art as it is served by no other literature and art, we may trust to the instinct of self-preservation in humanity for keeping Greeks as part of our culture."[221] Shelley, Keats, Byron, and the other radical Romantics used the Greeks as their models. "We are all Greeks," Shelley said. "Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their roots in Greece."[222] Prometheus was their inspiration for defiance. Robert Kennedy said his favorite reading was Greek tragedy. General George Marshall argued that no one could understand World War II who had

219. This issue is also addressed below in III.b (the *Iliad*) and III.c (the *Odyssey*).

220. Knox 1996, 77.

221. Gerhard 1980, 22–35.

222. Shelley 1822/1970, 3.

not read Thucydides, and the United States military has followed his advice, several times inviting Bernard Knox to speak on Thucydides at the Naval, National, and Air Force war colleges.[223] The Greek stories have had nearly continuous interest in Western art, and the persistent attention they have received has influenced the way Western awareness developed.[224] Nussbaum justifies her use of ancient material in this way:

> Thinking about the ancient texts has always been for me an especially fruitful way of reflecting about the issues: in part because of the increased self-understanding promoted by a clearer view of the history of ideas and conceptions that deeply influence us; in part also, however, because the ancient Greek traditions bring to the fore concerns that have been less prominent in contemporary philosophy, and organize the ethical questions in revealingly different ways. It was, then, not only the closeness of the Greeks' problems to important continuing problems (together with their historical influence on our view of the problems) but also the illuminating strangeness and difference of their approach, that led me to feel that a long look at their accounts might help us reflect better.[225]

She does not, however, suppose that there are "timeless" problems and "timeless" truths about human life "that stand altogether outside of the flow of history." Instead, she argues, with Aristotle, that no such truths are available: ". . . all truth is in some sense bounded by human experience, and thus by human history." She says ethics must be context sensitive "given Aristotle's insistence that ethics is about the experiences of a creature that is fundamentally a moving and changing creature."[226] Yet even allowing for movement and change, she says there is "substantial continuity and overlap" that result from the fact that the

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223. Knox 1989, 159.

224. A detailed account of the influences of *Oedipus* and other Greek stories on later literature is in Jane Davidson Reid, 1993. *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300–1990s.* New York: Oxford University Press. The influence of Sophocles's *Oedipus* on later art, literature, and film is discussed in Segal 1991, especially chapter 12.

225. Nussbaum 1993, 47

Greeks profoundly shaped our conceptions of things and, more importantly, because human life, while shaped by belief and cultural interpretation, "has a recognizable shape wherever it turns up." This is the result of common problems: mortality, limits of the body, the movement from infancy to maturity to death, a reliance on nature. It also results from common capacities: friendship, practical reasoning, wondering about the universe, humor, and delight. For Nussbaum, "It seems clear that even these shared experiences are to some extent shaped by culture; but I insist that there is sufficient overlap to make the notion of our 'common humanity' a rich and meaningful one, and a reasonable basis for a philosophical investigation."[227]

In the United States, Euripides's *Trojan Woman*, *Bacchae* and *Iphigeneia in Aulis* were produced several times as either protests against the Vietnam War or in support of other protest movements. In France, protests against the war in Algeria were supported in the theater by productions of *The Trojan Women*. Jean Anouilh and Bertolt Brecht produced their own renderings of *Antigone*. In Brecht, the prologue is set in Berlin, in April 1945: two sisters discover, hanging from a meat hook, the corpse of their brother, a deserter from the front executed by the SS. This was his response to those who, like Matthew Arnold in 1853, said that there was no longer any interest in Antigone's duty to her brother's corpse because England viewed the exposing of an enemy's corpse as no longer possible because sensibilities had sufficiently evolved beyond such barbarism. Anouilh also knew better than to believe humanity had changed: he lived in Paris when

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226. Nussbaum 1993, 47.

227. Nussbaum 1993, 48.

German occupiers routinely exhibited the corpses of executed Resistance fighters.[228]

Often dominated by female characters, the Athenian tragedies we know about clearly and forcefully speak to issues related to women and their role in community. As such, ancient depictions of women consider issues like those that have been the focus of women today. Knox says of *Medea*, especially the speech to the chorus:

> . . . with its recital of woman's wrongs and its defiance of the male claim to mastery on the basis of its role as warrior, has long served as a primal text for feminism, . . . in fact, both *Medea* and *The Women of Trachis* contain passages that seem intent on explaining the female project of selfhood.[229]

Similarly, George Steiner says of Sophocles' *Antigone* that it is one of the enduring and canonic acts in the history of our philosophic, literary, political consciousness and that "New 'Antigones' are being imagined, thought, lived now; and will be tomorrow."[230] Some of the new historicists argue against Steiner by asserting that reading our concerns into ancient literature is wrongheaded: their concerns, as their culture, were so entirely unlike ours that we err in thinking ancient authors could speak to questions about our values. But reading the stories shows quite otherwise. When Medea says "What they say of us is that we have a peaceful time living at home, while they do the fighting in war. How wrong they are! I would very much rather stand three times in the front of battle than bear one child,"[231] she speaks from an emotional and familial

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228. Knox 1989, 160

229. Knox 1996, 80.

230. Steiner 1984, 304.

231. *Medea* 248–251.

understanding that is familiar to modern audiences when the play is performed today.

Even some who warn against finding similarities between ancient and modern thought accept that there are limits to claims that the ancient is entirely foreign to our experience. For example, E. R. Dodds, who warns against finding modern parallels in ancient sources, says nevertheless that ". . . as a man cannot escape from his own shadow, so no generation can pass judgement on the problems of history without reference, conscious or unconscious, to its own problems."[232] We look for parallels because ethical knowledge has been derived by each generation's reading of the mythology, scripture, and literature of previous generations.

Even though the modern world stretches round the earth and draws into itself other traditions as well, Bernard Williams argues that to learn about the Greeks is an immediate part of self understanding. "Those other traditions will give it new and different configurations, but they will not cancel the fact that the Greek past is specially the past of modernity" because the modern world was a European creation "presided over by the Greek past."[233]

When we make decisions in our lives about this issue or that, we tend not to educe understanding from abstract and universal ethical theories, although they indirectly contribute to beliefs. Instead, our understanding derives largely from experience and from cultural norms portrayed in story and is confirmed by yet more experience. We take this combination of norms, experience, and

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232. Dodds 1951, 253.

learned understandings and place all of it together in a web of deep understanding—Putnam's moral image—that is drawn upon for making decisions.

Because this decision-making method does not build from universally demonstrable principles, however, it is vulnerable to skeptical challenge. But indubitable principles do not incorporate the full range of human experience, the emotional as well as the rational, which is the advantage of understanding derived from stories. David Thomasma claims, in relationship to the way we develop understanding and make decisions, that he cannot "imagine any choice that does not involve a balancing of goods or cherished values." [234] The postmodernists thus get it right, he said, when they observe that the Enlightenment project is dead and that not only is there no chance to develop a completely rationally coherent basis for ethics, but such efforts produce deadly results. Deadly, Thomasma insists, because they "are formed by the systems of thought in which reason dominated all other versions of reality, eliminating the emotional, irrational, impulsive, and incoherent features of human beings and nature itself.

That said, can the same understandings be drawn by an audience today as in Athens? No, but the stories are expressions of themes that are common to human experience: a sense of injustice, of suffering, of not being heard or understood. The subject of an ancient tragedy or a Shakespearean drama may speak directly to its time, but the themes of great literature are universal to

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233. Williams 1993, 3.

234. Thomasma 2000, 67ff.

human experience. The subject of *Antigone* or *Medea* is a woman's experience in the ancient world, as the subject of *King Lear* is English politics and social confusion in the sixteenth century. But the themes are justice, honor, the irresistibility of sin, the desire for power, the terrible difficulties of life's turnabouts, the fear of growing old, and the pain of betrayal. These do not seem to change with time. We gain understanding about such experiences from the Greeks because, as Knox says, we inherited from them their virtues and vices and so their heritage defines us. It "makes us a people different from those who have grown up in the religious faiths and philosophies of the East; it is for better or worse, the driving force of that civilization we call Western."[235]

*e. Learning from literature*

I have shown previously in this chapter that stories depict persistent values and that their persistence provides justification for the limited claim that they form elements of the moral image we have of ourselves.[236] I have also said that awareness of the persistence of these values can help us when we enter the communal fray about how we should proceed in the future with a variety of human endeavors.[237] In addition, I have shown that stories can lead to understandings about human life that are very different than those that flow from traditional philosophical discourse. In this regard I said that we learn

235. Knox 1989, 161.

236. See above, II.a and II.c.

237. See above, II.d.

something from the Biblical parable of the good Samaritan, for example, that we cannot learn from a Kantian text.[238]

Finally, in my introduction I said there are ways to read stories by which we can sort out which values we want to continue honoring and which we might want to shed from our moral image. The current section is an attempt to enter one part of the effort to refute the skeptical postmodern doubts that the step can be made from noting the persistence of some values to showing that they should persist, and further that they can usefully contribute to discussions about how to proceed in the future.[239]

The tendency in literary theory, as in philosophy, has been to suppress the claims made by humanistic and religious traditions that useful ethical understanding is to be found in the literature of poetry, tragedy, and the novel.[240] These claims about using literature are related to an assertion made by Charles Taylor, who says that getting a sense of who we are is done by orientating ourselves in the evaluative framework of a moral space. Thus to be without an "evaluative framework" would leave one psychically disorientated. The evaluative frameworks Taylor refers to occur in various forms, but an essential one is a culture's stories.[241]

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238. See above, II.c.

239. I rely in this section partly on David Parker's suggestions for developing what he calls a new evaluative discourse (in Parker 1994).

240. There are exceptions of course, including Nussbaum, Parker, Richard Rorty, and others.

241. Taylor 1989, chapter 2.

Those who argue against evaluative value in literature have their beginnings in Enlightenment rationalism, which sometimes argued that ethics is entirely a cultural construct that seeks to find permanence in the ephemerality of value. They reject ethical evaluation of literature as either ideologically and subjectively compromised, or as inherently pointless. John Carey argues both objections in asserting that an account of value in literature has no credibility "in the godless universe which most people now inhabit." He goes on to assert that "good and evil and other such ephemera were created by the human mind in its attempt to impose some significance on the amoral flux which constitutes reality."[242]

There is little disagreement that some of our enduring values should be left behind. Some outlived their time because they have been shown to lead to the unjust oppression of other beings, others because they tend generally to lead to harm rather than well-being,[243] and some because, indeed, they were used to support ideologies we can no longer tolerate. But that some persistent values should be shed does not entail that none should continue to be honored. This section addresses the issue by considering how we can read stories so that we may use them to differentiate those values that increase well-being from those that perpetuate human suffering. In addition, following the arguments above in II.c and elsewhere, I will discuss this issue in relationship to my claim that stories

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242. Carey 1980, 204.

243. This may be thought about in reference to a wider focus of concern than the familial, communal, and erotic relationships of human beings. Our values have effect on ecosystems, on the earth generally, on other kinds of beings, and perhaps on the entire universe. I do not speak to these here only because the focus of this dissertation is on values related to human relationship.

tell us things that philosophical discourse cannot, and further that they do it in a way that is more accessible and powerful than the usual genres of philosophy.

It is partly because of this that beginning in the mid-1980s, literary theorists increasingly turned to moral philosophy to discuss stories—a shift Martha Nussbaum characterizes as "a marked turn toward the ethical."[244] Similarly, moral philosophers began a 'turn' toward the literary at about the same time.[245] Richard Rorty asserts that this 'turn' resulted partly from a shift in philosophy from a culture of positivism to a culture of pragmatism, which views science as a genre of literature, or, stated another way, literature and the arts as inquiries on the same footing as scientific inquiries:

> Thus it sees ethics as neither more 'relative' or 'subjective' than scientific theory, nor as needing to be made 'scientific'. Physics is a way of trying to cope with various bits of the universe; ethics is a matter of trying to cope with other bits. Mathematics helps physics do its job; literature and the arts help ethics do its.[246]

Rorty also suggests that there is no need to find philosophical foundations that make moral codes as 'objective' as we once thought were needed for physics, and so it is not necessary to decide whether to choose from two possibilities: foundationalism or "intellectual and moral chaos."[247] While I do not share Rorty's pragmatic skepticism, his move away from foundationalism

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244. Nussbaum 1990, 29, 38ff. Literary theorists comprising this 'turn' include Parker, Lionel Trilling, Barbara Johnson, J. Hillis Miller, Murray Krieger, Richard Freadman, and Wayne Booth.

245. These include Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Richard Bernstein, Sanley Cavell, Richard Rorty, Frederick Olafson, and Cora Diamond.

246. Rorty 1991, xlii.

247. Bernstein 1986, 10–11.

supports my thesis that it is not necessary to ground ethical evaluation of literature in universal objectivity in order to claim criteria for evaluation.

Abstract and universal ethical theories filter through a culture in such a way that they contribute to our individual and communal decisions. But our day-to-day decisions are usually not made by directly applying theory. Mostly, we decide based on a combination of experience, learned understandings, and cultural norms that have come into our consciousness by way of stories, which are then confirmed, or not, by additional experience. All these elements gather together in a web of knowing that Putnam calls our 'moral image' of the world.

The troublesome element in any attempt to consider social problems by employing the values found in stories is that as stories assemble in a common cultural inheritance, they are of different kinds: some contain elements of truth that can assist in efforts to enhance human thriving; others contain outright error, superstitition, and oppressive nonsense. Further, because our decision-making processes do not build from universally demonstrable principles, they are vulnerable to the skeptical challenge I mentioned earlier. But one of the reasons we tend not to directly consult such principles is that they are largely barren of the full range of human experience. They are thus limited in their ability to convey meaningful information about the living of a human life. What is needed is a method by which we can educe from stories those values that not only persist, but that are helpful in forging an equitable human community.

The first element of such a method is to work from a premise that stories have certain effects employed for various purposes, sometimes conscious, sometimes not. For example, I showed previously that in antiquity, as now,

stories of all kinds are instrumental in formation of cultural identity. One side of this is that they can serve the social purpose of upholding vested interests; they can provide a kind of mythical justification to enable and further the goals of the status quo—for good and ill. Ruth Finnegan, for example, says poetry has been used as propaganda to strengthen the position of rulers.[248] But stories also can be employed to disrupt and change society. Bob Dylan did this, and continues to, in his stories about the barbarities of the improper use of power and the possibilities of change.

So if Goody, Lévi-Strauss, Finnegan, and others have got it right,[249] stories serve as the primary instrument by which individuals and cultures define themselves and transmit their views about what is important to the group. In this way, stories are more than mere repetitions of cautionary tales; they are the instrument by which we create our world and by which we can change it. Stories, and the way they transmute over time, can thus help us decide what aspects of ourselves have continuing relevance. They also become essential in knowing how we want to create ourselves in the future, which is a part of the next element of the method I am suggesting.

The second element is contained in an assertion made by David Parker, who believes stories can actively be used not just in their role as one of the currents that form our moral image of the world, but as an important impetus in recognizing social limitations and to alter our image to create a better, more just image. He argues that readers can actively use stories to understand the

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248. Finnegan 1977, 242. Also see Tandy 1997 and above, section II.b.

249. See the discussion of this, above, in section II.b.

limitations and cruelties of human society and that this can lead to efforts to change the society.[250] Stories show the values employed in cultural processes and practices, and so canonic literature can point to habitual categories and behaviors related to social codes and ethnocentrism.

Novels that endure in a culture dramatize and thus bring fully to our awareness the various values and disvalues to which we are habituated. By seeing these places of acculturation, we are more likely to get new ideas about their effect, as well as alternatives to these culture-bound habits. They can also show us the way people live lives in different cultures, and thus reinforce both the idea that there are underlying commonalities and that there are other possibilities. By showing patterns of conformity, stories can help readers acknowledge and reconsider their beliefs. It is often in this way—seeing patterns of conformity—that new ideas come into our awareness. In relationship to Aristotelian examination of universally held ethical beliefs, Nussbaum describes how it is, by looking carefully at beliefs and the way they are lived out by different people and cultures, that one's own ideas can be altered; sometimes entirely new ideas formed. The method makes possible "new discoveries, radical departures, or sharp changes of position . . ."[251]

A third element is the claim that stories can provide a truer, more full-blooded view of the way moral values play out in human lives. Nussbaum says that certain canonic stories are not just helpful in elucidating philosophical

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250. Parker 1994, 32ff.

251. Nussbaum 1986, 258.

understanding, they are necessary sources of insight.[252] But I go further than claiming they are merely another element of philosophical insight, a kind of addenda to Kant's description of the rational duty to follow moral law. I argue instead that reading Kant, or reading one of Mill's ethical treatises, is a source for a particular kind of understanding. Reading Euripides, Dickens, and Faulkner is not only a different source, it provides understanding of an entirely different kind. On Nussbaum's account, for example, stories encompass the particularities of situations in a way that reasoning processes such as those of Mill and Kant do not.[253] Aristotle, too, says poetry is different, and has "graver import" because "its statements are of the nature of universals . . ."[254] Henry James asserts that it is by way of poetry that we become "finely aware,"[255] because it allows us to understand what is important about our lives, how we describe ourselves, how we want to be, and how we do not want to be. We cannot get the fullness of understanding by reading Plato and Aristotle alone that we can achieve by reading *Antigone*. Gary Wihl compares the detailed, "richly descriptive vocabularies" of narrative with the ascetic language of philosophy, concluding that philosophical discourse does not permit the irony required for "perspicuity in the areas of ethical conflict and competing social agendas."[256]

Parker insists that tragic poetry in particular has a way of bringing home to the audience, "in a way that systematic philosophy could not, the painfully

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252. Nussbaum 1990, 23.

253. Nussbaum 1993, 71. Also see Nussbaum 1990, 3ff., 23.

254. *Poetics* 9.1451b4–5.

255. James 1934, 62.

256. Wihl 1995, 6.

complex, indeterminate, intractable nature of ethical deliberation to human beings caught up in the midst of it."[257] By his, and by Nussbaum's, account, this view of human life is more than just distinctive as a philosophical source, it claims that some views of life that should be seriously considered cannot be understood by means of anything other than imaginative literature.

The value of stories on all of these accounts is that they are able to bring alive to a reader or an audience a sense of what matters, and of how our intimate as well as our communal connections have important emotional elements that cannot be drawn clearly in any form but that of narrative and poetry. Proust believes, for example, that human values and psychology cannot be understood by intellectual activity alone, and clearly not by studying only philosophical theory; they can be fully felt and understood only if they are known emotionally, and "knowing emotionally" is best portrayed in stories.[258]

The fourth element is a denial of the skeptical argument that rejects ethical evaluation of literature on grounds either that it is too ideologically compromised, and thereby subjective, or that it is inherently pointless because values are merely human constructs that have no enduring reality. That evaluation is ideologically and culturally compromised does not contain the conclusion that evaluation has no worth. Similarly, that the values contained in stories are the result of human imagination and the living of human lives does not infer that they have no enduring reality: they point to places where there is something we share in our conceptions of ourselves, in this culture, over time.

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257. Parker 1994, 35.

They do not contain objective reality, but they nevertheless have the force of objectivity in this narrow sense.

Thomas Nagel tries to get at this when he argues that the subjective is indeed a side of reality. He argues that there is something that it is like to be a bat.[259] It is also what Alasdair MacIntyre has in mind when he argues that the post-Enlightenment tradition has raised rationality to undue heights and lowered valuational and emotional understanding to non-importance.[260] He argues for a kind of objectivity in values similar to that of Nagel's claim. There are moral traditions, he says, and we would do well to attend them:

> I am never able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only *qua* individual . . . I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These contribute the given of my life, my moral starting point . . . For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships.[261]

Similarly, Parker says our individual identities are embedded in communal stories, "which helps us to see why the so-called literary cannon, in so far as it has contributed to the shaping of Western culture, is so important for us." The moral traditions of stories are partly inherited and partly created and so are "in some sense already within ourselves."[262]

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258. Proust 1981. For more on Proust and philosophy, see Mary Rawlinson, "Art and Truth: Reading Proust," in *Philosophy and Literature* 1982, 6: 1–16.

259. Nagel 1979.

260. MacIntyre 1981, 175.

261. MacIntyre 1981, 204f.

262. Parker 1994, 17–18.

The fifth element is partly based on the existence of "thick" evaluative concepts embedded in culture and which turn up in the culture's stories. Following Williams, our ethical terminology includes such thick concepts as 'coward,' 'lie,' 'brutality,' gratitude,' and others. A skeptic would argue that these are "action-guiding," but Williams says they are "world-guided."[263] He argues that the existence of these thick ethical concepts makes a difference in our lives, but admits that they are "indeed open to being unseated by reflection . . ." Nevertheless,

> to the extent that they survive it, a practice that uses them is more stable in the face of the general, structural reflections about the truth of ethical judgments than a practice that does not use them. The judgements made with these concepts can straightforwardly be true, and, for the people who have those concepts, the claim involved in assenting to them can correspondingly be honored.[264]

That 'thick' ethical concepts are open to be unseated by reflection is important to this aspect of what I am suggesting. This is not the same thing as saying they are ephemeral cultural constructs that have no validity.

Having the capacity for being unseated, Williams's 'thick' ethical concepts are more resistant to the skeptical argument against employing the literary canon as a source of moral value. This skeptical argument can be thought about in two ways. The first is that assigning such valuation is circular: the canonical texts are great because they point to important and timeless human values. How do we know they are important and timeless? Because they are in the texts. A second, only slightly different version of this is that the texts point to enduring truths

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263. Williams 1985, 142.

264. Williams 1985, 200.

because they have endured. If they did not offer something important, why would we keep reading them?[265] A skeptical critic, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, argues that there is less to be found in canonical texts than proponents claim to find. Some works survive for a variety of reasons other than that they offer important values that should be honored. Once a text survives, she argues, survival itself increases its prospects for canonical status. Then the text begins

> to perform certain characteristic cultural functions by virtue of the very fact that it has endured . . .the canonical work begins increasingly not merely to survive within but to shape and create the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted and, for that very reason, to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing. Nothing endures like endurance.[266]

This suggests even more circularity in that the story, following Parker, points to important values only because the story itself provided the importance to these values in the first place. But this is merely another version of saying that a literary canon is culturally constructed and culturally relative—which becomes troublesome, Parker says, only if one argues for an essentialist and universalist assumption about human nature.[267] If we set aside such assumptions and claim only that the canonic values are deeply embedded in this culture and thus tell us something about ourselves in this one culture for this period of time, then we can go on to employ the strategies I am suggesting to learn more about what is helpful and what is not. Thus the reason Williams's description of 'thick' concepts is resistant to the skeptical objections is that he grants in the beginning that if with considered examination we find that the use of certain thick concepts as

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265. This description is a paraphrase of a discussion of this issue in Parker 1994, 21.

266. Herrnstein Smith 1988, 50.

267. Parker 1994, 22-3.

ethical values is harmful to human thriving, then they can be set aside as no longer relevant to the kind of people we want to be.

The sixth element is to accept Rorty's assertion that there are no non-circular justifications. The seventh is to claim that finding useful values in literature must be done "within an interpreting and evaluative community"[268] that brings to the task the moral progress, experience, and understandings that have accrued over time.

The eighth element is to understand, as background to the effort, something about Charles Taylor's historical account of the making of the modern identity.[269] He says we live by way of a wide-ranging array of goods that developed in the culture over a very long time and for various reasons. It is a mistake to think that because many of those goods have often been mistakenly employed or misused by shortsighted people, the goods themselves should be dismissed. By bringing to bear the full range of the culture's goods, canonical texts can be plumbed in such a way that the various goods act as checks and balances on one another. These goods are a part of modern cultural identity, Taylor asserts, in that they are aspects of three mutually conflicting strands intertwined as formative threads beginning in antiquity and continuing today.

The three strands are (a) an other-regarding Kantian-moral one derived from the Judaic and Christian traditions; (b) one that privileges disengaged rationality, autonomy, freedom, human equality, and universality, which comes

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268. Parker 1994, 24–5.

269. Taylor 1989, 107ff.

from the Enlightenment; and (c) the Romantic one, which emphasizes the demands of nature, human fulfilment, and expressive integrity.[270]

Taylor's reason for emphasizing the three strands is to assert that it is not helpful to think of our moral understandings solely by way of the explanatory accounts of either Aristotle, Kant, Sartre, Nietzsche, Rorty, MacIntyre, or anyone else. Instead, all the various conceptions of the good that have influenced the Western psyche continue in some way to have relevance. All of the inextricably woven-together strands are included in who we are. As such, one of the lessons that might be drawn from Taylor's account is that instead of dismissing as no longer helpful some aspects of our moral inheritance, it might be more useful to examine them in such a way that we develop more understanding about when, whether, and how to employ them. In this sense, all of the values found in canonic stories can be helpful in our effort to understand who we are and who we want to become.

To sum up, the eight elements that I suggest be brought to the effort of sorting out which values to keep and which to set aside are that

(1) stories have effect, including, for good and ill, the forging of cultural identity;
(2) stories can be actively used to impel change because they can help us recognize limitations and encourage alterations in our moral image of the world;
(3) stories provide something different than philosophical discourse, including a more full-blooded understanding for the living of human lives;

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270. This synopsis of Taylor's historical account is from Parker 1989, 20.

(4) it is possible to refute the skeptical argument that rejects all ethical evaluation of literature on grounds that it is irredeemably compromised by ideology and the ephemerality of human construction;
(5) 'thick' evaluative concepts can be found in the literary canon, but they can be unseated by reflection, and while their thickness relies for justification on a certain circular argument, this would be a problem only if I were to claim essentialist and universalist assumptions, which I do not;
(6) following Rorty, there are no non-circular justifications;
(7) the effort to find useful values in stories must be done within an interpreting and evaluative community that brings to the task the moral progress that has accrued over time; and, finally,
(8) we must employ Taylor's account of the three strands of modern identity, as well as the full range of goods comprised by that identity, in any effort to understand the continuing value and relevance of canonic stories.

By combining these eight elements, it may be possible to arrive at a way to resist the lingering argument against finding useful and relevant values in the literary canon. Much of the skeptical argument is the belief that those who want to find useful ethical values in stories mistakenly rely on the claim that certain values are useful because they point to constants in human nature and timelessness in moral understandings. Skeptics say that values, like human nature, are contingent and relative, and thus ephemeral. Further, they say values are usually employed to maintain traditions of oppression directed toward those who lack power, or who are in some way regarded as the 'other.'

I argued previously that this is too simplistic a view. While values employed in stories can be used to oppress and to maintain the power of whatever group has control, this is not the only purpose and not the only

understanding to be gotten from literature. My claim about values in stories argues that the values we want to resist shedding are neither illusory, arbitrary, nor ephemeral. They are, as Parker asserts, the product of a system that transcends both naïve objectivism and dismissive skepticism. Through stories we can have an experience that speaks to issues related to the actual living out of human lives. If read by people who will interpret what they read through the lens of human experience and evaluate it by employing various elements of the culture's accrued understandings, something very different than support for oppression and suffering can emerge. By bringing Aristotle's practical wisdom to a text, the occlusions of the 'usual' interpretations can be replaced by new ways of seeing.

Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* may provide a good example of what I think is possible when we bring to bear the full weight of a discerning and evaluative reading community. Valuation of the nineteenth century novel's worth has varied. Some have unabashed admiration for its depiction of a slave with the full emotional complexity of all other human beings. Others dismiss the story for perpetuating oppressively harmful myths about African Americans. Christopher Clausen's analysis of the issue asserts, for example, that those who attacked the book "were mistaken in their interpretation of it (but) they were by no means wrong in identifying an important basis for evaluating it" when they said it condoned slavery and racism.[271]

These very different evaluations of the same story might be seen as evidence that finding ethical values in literature is a doomed enterprise that will

founder in the difficulty of fixing certainty. But I think not. It is important that we have both views at hand, along with many others. With enough voices and the disparate views they express, we will find represented the full range of values and disvalues that are a part of our moral image. The process of differentiating those that may helpfully contribute to the makeup of our future moral image from those we want to set aside is accomplished together, in concert, as we decide which cause suffering and which help us to thrive by applying some process such as that I suggest.

The process of differentiating is comprised of having an awareness of and employing the eight elements I listed. I said previously that this rests on a certain trust in moral progress as well as acceptance that there are no non-circular justifications. Given sufficient time and the understanding that comes from the confluence of human experience, it is possible to sort out this value from that in the canon. In *Huckleberry Finn,* for example, we have generally settled on the qualities of sympathetic feeling, equitable treatment, loyalty, familial duty, and arguably even honesty as the embedded values that we continue to admire. We also take from it what a lineage of criticism has taught us: that while the story's portrayal of Jim creates him as a fully formed human being, it also can have the effect of perpetuating stereotypical assumptions. These assumptions occur partly in the use of language, partly in the story's imagery, and partly in the relationship between Jim and Huck.

Are these the views of everyone in the culture? No. But when *Huckleberry Finn* is used as an instructional text by a discerning reader or teacher, these

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271. Clausen 1986, 3.

various qualities and problems are discussed, evaluated, and placed in the context of other strains in our moral image. They are considered in light of all that we have learned during the century and a half since slavery was a part of this culture. The result is not an unthinking following of the dominant group's efforts to oppress the vulnerable. Over time, with sufficient attention paid to the full range of discussion and to the various goods that Taylor urges us to attend, we can take from *Huckleberry Finn* the beginning of new configurations in the moral image. We do this partly because of the communal discussion, and the discussion incorporates a deeper understanding of the issues because participants have a visceral knowledge of the people and their lives. They would not get this from, say, the discussion of justice in a text by John Rawls. Hearing Huck's struggle, and having the picture in our imagination of Huck and Jim floating down the river, talking, caring about each other, learning from Jim about his family, and trying to understand their situation—all of this creates an awareness that cannot be generated by a text on ethical or political theories.

In a similar way, we examine texts from antiquity with the understanding and experience of not just a century and a half, but from the vantage of more than two thousand years. As we probably do not draw from *Huckleberry Finn* what would have been drawn by a reader in the antebellum South, so we do not draw from *Antigone* what an ancient Greek would have. We bring the understanding of generations and generations of experience, change, and new awarenesses. We see expressions of value that are part of a larger moral code, and we evaluate them with the experience of eyes that have seen the result of slavery, of overweening power, of oppression, and of injustice. We also see it

through the prism of a culture that allows disparate views to be expressed and arguments to be joined.

As we try to understand what limits circumscribe our lives, the expression of many values alter. But some aspects of them persist to suggest commonality across time. Loyalty may be one of these, the persistence of which probably says something important about human beings. This does not mean, as I said earlier, that the priority we assign to the objects of loyalty—family, state, religion, friends—necessarily remains constant. But when we see Antigone's expression of loyalty to her brother and then see Huck's loyalty to his friend Jim, we not only admire it, we begin to see that it is an important element of human relationship that we would not want to be without. Does this mean all expressions of loyalty are admirable? Of course not. Some loyal acts cause human suffering. But when we put an expression of loyalty in the web of other human goods, we can develop the ability over time to sort out which is which. It then becomes possible to portray loyalty itself as a persistent value in this culture, such that when it is expressed in a way that contributes to human well-being, we conclude, based on experience and received knowledge, that it has the capacity to enrich our lives. It also means that to eliminate loyalty as a value from our moral image of the world would be to significantly alter the nature of human relationships in ways that we would not want to occur.

The last argument I will make to claim justification for finding useful ethical values in literature is that stories— whether told in literature, theater, or film—are the most accessible way to develop moral understanding. If we can encourage people to thoughtfully employ them as a resource for making sense of their lives, they will not be at the mercy of accepting the moral evaluations of

others. When people read stories that contain the culture's long-held beliefs about family, friendship, honesty, loyalty, and other values, they may put them together in various individual configurations, but the weight of time and the web of other values, can provide a platform from which they can with more wisdom further the task of expanding moral encompassment. If on the other hand we encourage suspicion of the literature of the past because the past contains cultural skeletons we want to leave behind, then we will find ourselves without the benefit of generations of wisdom. We would then be left in the situation Parker fears: being imprisoned "in the peculiar perspectives of the present, and making it necessary, from the ethical point of view, to reinvent the wheel from generation to generation."[272]

This does not mean that we need constantly to look for reiterations of what honesty means, or the value of living a good life, or other truisms that can show up in stories. What marks most of canonic literature is ambiguity and complexity, not conceptions that are either essentialist or simplistic. For Parker, this means the stories we should be attending are those that demand

> the fullest, most engaged and most intelligent examination. Ethical or moral answer-giving is what ultimately fails to satisfy interest, especially if it is of a kind that suppresses other sorts of answers. Those works that most sustain interest in the long run are the ones that present both interference and dynamic interrelationship between different ethical systems or conceptions.[273]

This is why Charles Taylor argues that stories which do not account for the full range of goods in a pluralistic culture will not be adequate for long. When they

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272. Parker 1994, 196.

273. Parker 1994, 197.

fail to expand our understanding of the three strands that make up our accrued identity, we will notice that they lack a certain awareness of the enormous complexities in our moral image. Those stories and the values in them will shortly disappear from our view, replaced by others that can better assist us in the task of encompassment.

In the end, it may be a mistaken enterprise to claim too much for a method by which we deliberately sort out the helpful or 'good' values from the not-so-helpful or 'bad' values in stories. Any too-systematic picking apart of the elements of a story can lead us to lose sight of the practical wisdom that distinguishes the way the literary imagination involves us in ethical consideration. The practical wisdom of stories is found not, as Parker argues, "in their direct enfleshment of preconceived commitments of moral belief, principle, or ideology," but rather, in the best of literature, wisdom is to be found "in their setting-up of exploratory interlocution between *conflicting* ethical claims."[274] We should guard against the tendency of philosophy to treat the use of stories as if it were a technical problem that could be tidied up, or perhaps discarded entirely, by the application of strict logical theory. This would impoverish the endeavor, severing it from real human lives.

So it is important that as we look for justification allowing us to discern which values found in stories continue to have relevance, we do not lose sight of a story's specific capacity to do something entirely different than is the function

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274. Parker 1994, 38.

of standard philosophical discourse.[275] This function is what sometimes is referred to as the spirit or the ethos or character of a story, "which involves both the sense of life that is expressed by the work as a whole and, implicit in that, the practical discernment which mediates between, and explores, the clashes of moral value it embodies."[276] In this sense, stories are important to our understanding in a way that is like the Aristotelián conception of poetry being important not merely because of the themes it embodies, nor by application of principles and categories, but instead by the vital engagement of all the senses, together, exploring imaginatively.

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275. For more on this, see Frank Palmer's (1992) discussion of what philosophy can learn from literature.

276. Wayne Booth (1988) and S. L. Goldberg (1993) both discuss the value of the literary imagination in this way, as does Parker 1994, 38ff.

## Chapter III: Stories

### *a. The variety of boundaries*

In what follows, I examine how certain secular and religious stories contain ideas that form parts of our Western moral image. They provide a glimpse of the part of ourselves that perceives limits, the part that understands, despite Protagoras, that we may not be the measure of all things. This is why we can know that while Creon's argument for the primacy of human law seems a reasonable position, it is the concern about divine, or perhaps universal, law expressed by Antigone that stirs deep places in our hearts, warning that we must beware.

Where these ideas form thicknesses we find clues that can help us in current discussions of issues related generally to health care and specifically to genetic manipulations, including cloning. The ideas pointed to in these thicknesses serve as guides when we make valuational choices, especially those choices that move us from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from places we believe are in our realm toward places we believe are forbidden ground, perhaps God's realm. The dilemma is clearly enunciated in tragedy, where, as Allen Dunn says, "The spectacle of suffering and extremity . . . functions . . . both as a reminder of the limits of human values, their timebound, artificial fragility, and an invocation of the beauty of this fragility."[277]

That there is a boundary between the human and the divine, or the natural and supernatural, sometimes encompasses and sometimes occurs in addition to

other beliefs about boundaries, including both aversions to crossing categories and inclinations toward honoring the separations in dualities. For example, a boundary exists in Western cultural between humans and beasts.[278] It is a demarcation imposed by dint of commonly held cultural beliefs that the universe—perhaps God (or some divine process)—created categories, either intentionally or at least with some inherent logic to it. And, further, that separations between categories are both "natural" and "good." The connotations of "natural" and "good" here are dependent upon the beliefs of some who claim that divine actions are necessarily good and that honoring boundaries between categories is a necessary part of accepting that God has his reasons that humans cannot know.

When some express revulsion at the mixing of genetic materials from humans and beasts, it is an expression of a cultural understanding of natural boundaries. Humans and gods mate with some frequency in the Greek stories. These instances generally produce offspring that in one way or another cause chaos for humans. As we shall see, Dionysus, Achilleus, and others upset the balance in the world and stir in us questions about proper respect for limits. Similarly, when humans merge with beasts, as occurs with centaurs, the Sphinx, and at least metaphorically in the festivals of Dionysus, difficulties inevitably ensue. When in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom is transformed into a creature half human and half beast who is nevertheless loved by Titania, the queen of the fairies, Shakespeare uses our aversion to crossing categories for

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277. Dunn 1990, 657.

278. This is clearly not the case in all cultures, especially those that practice animistic religions.

both comic and serious purpose.[279] The supernatural intervenes in the world, causing an upsetting of the regular order. The story shows us what harm can befall us when uncontrolled forces are let loose, boundaries crossed, and categories mixed.

In his study of Sophocles, Charles Segal discusses boundaries and crossing categories and treats as fundamental to tragedy the precariousness of the line between human and beast.[280] Similarly, James Davidson argues that "civilization itself is built on the containment of animal passions within boundaries of rules and protocols . . . If these rules are broken or inverted . . . then civilization itself is in jeopardy and a *daimon* [roughly, spirit] is loose in the *oikos* [household] who will turn the table over." [281]

Shakespeare's ideas for Bottom as well as for other crossings of categories were drawn from depictions in Greek art and theater. During the period from the seventh to the first centuries BCE, men and women are frequently portrayed as consorting with various deities and near deities—gods, nymphs, satyrs, giants, centaurs, and other inhabitants of the netherworld. A painting from the second half of the fourth century found on the wall of a royal tomb at Vergina, shows Hades clutching Persephone with one arm and the reins of his chariot with the other as he takes her to the underworld.[282] The picture alludes to the demarcation between the underworld and the human world, but it

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279. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.1.

280. Segal 1981, 87–88. See especially *Ajax*, 129–131, 139; *Antigone*, 157–158; *Electra*, 269–270; *OT*, 211, 216–217, 223–224; *The Women of Trachis*, 95–98, 104–105.

281. Davidson 1998.

282. Boardman 1986, 293.

suggests the possibility that the two worlds may be accessible to each other, that inhabitants of one can be involved with those of the other. Hades' land may be a different place, but this seems merely a matter of geography. The veil between this world and his is very thin, but it is still a veil, and the separation is meant to serve as a proscription against human intrusion. Even Aristotle honored the veil, claiming that while this world is made of earth, air, fire, and water, the outer worlds of the moon, sun, and stars are composed of ether, which is both pure and divine.[283] Isaac Newton would eventually disabuse us of beliefs that this world operates under different laws than control the cosmos, but even with his explanations, the perception persists that there is something fundamentally different about the makeup and operation of whatever regions exist beyond our reach.

The tension that results, between what we think we know and what we think perhaps we should not enter, is much like the tension that developed as monotheism began enveloping the West. The old pagan and chthonic gods[284] were in our midst, close at hand, accessible, and comforting in their participation with our world. Sacrifices to them could be thought of as sharing a meal with them. Their presence was immediate, apparent in the day to day events of rain,

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283. *On the Universe* 392a5.

284. Chthonic derives from the Greek *chthon* (earth) and refers to the deities, spirits, and other beings dwelling under the earth. The principal Greek deities included the twelve Olympians—Zeus, Hera, Athena, Apollo, and so forth—along with the chtonic gods, including Hades and his wife Persephone. The souls of the dead were generally thought to be taken to the underworld by Hermes (See page 111 for more on this). Simon Price (Price 1999, page 101ff.) has an interesting discussion about the use of "curse tablets" to seek the assistance of the chthonic powers for help in legal and political disputes, rivalries, and sexual matters. Kerrigan 1996, 34ff., also discusses curse tablets and issues related to the Greek view of death and treatment of the dead. Also see Segal 1981 on related issues involving magic, and Burkert 1977/1985, especially194–9, on issues related to death, the afterlife, and chthonic deities.

childbirth, death, and bad luck. Monotheism brought a distant, transcendent, unknowable, and ungovernable deity. The change was neither fast nor easy. As we shall see in Genesis, the Israelites' attitude toward divinity moved back and forth, hesitantly, between the old, close-at-hand local gods, and the new idea of a universal but distant God of the cosmos.[285] The wrestling of Jacob with God, or at least an angel of God, may be seen as an indication of the struggle to sort out the implications of the shifting ideas.[286] Similarly, the difficulties at Sinai[287] between the competing notion of the unseen God of Moses and the immediately present god, Baal, who could be seen in the golden calf, represent the tension between the old and the new. As the perception of God thus changed, with it came concurrent uncertainty about the divine/human relationship, and thus about boundaries and limitations.

These and other allusions to boundaries mark the development of cultural ideas related to human limitations. It may be helpful to understand how these ideas occur in Western stories so that we are more aware of their implications in questions related, for example, to whether important boundaries are violated by cloning or by some versions of genetic manipulation. If there is a possibility that we are seeing the beginning of a shift from begetting children to manufacturing children, is this a violation of a boundary that surrounds cherished ideas about children and family? The discussion between Paul Ramsey and Joseph Fletcher

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285. A possible example of this hesitance occurs at Genesis 18.1 when God seems to appear as three gods at the entrance to Abraham's tent.

286. Genesis 32.24.

287. Exodus 31.18ff., 32.

raised this question thirty years ago and it has not been resolved.[288] These understandings also can be usefully employed in other questions as well: Do our stories about boundaries tell us anything about our responsibilities to future people? About intergenerational justice? About whether intrinsic differences exist between using genetic technology to enhance intelligence and other means to accomplish the same end? Perhaps even about the sometimes conflicting responsibilities of protecting public well-being versus a physician's duty to individual patients?

In each of these issues are embedded emotional and imaginative responses that affect how we view the specific dilemmas. They occur concurrently with the rational elements we also bring to the discussion. Some of these emotional and imaginative qualities are inherent to Western thought generally, but some are peculiar to specific religious or social environments. For example, one of the reasons there are not more people willing to donate organs after death is fear among some about what may or may not happen to their bodies and souls after death if their bodies are not intact.[289] This fear arises partly from theological concerns, but it arises too as a result of fears and revulsions expressed over time in stories that in turn lead to commonly held emotional responses. A similar phenomenon arises in response to creating what is

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288. Essays by each appeared in *The Hastings Center Report*, with Ramsey arguing that we are in danger of altering the paradigm to manufacturing children, and Fletcher asserting that gaining more control over childbearing affords more advantages than disadvantages. Fletcher in *The Hastings Center Report* 2/5 (Nov 1972), 1–4 and *The Hastings Center Report* 4/5 (December 1974), 4–7.

289. Although the Nicene Creed affirms only the "resurrection of the dead," resurrection of the flesh was included in the Apostles' Creed. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, resurrection of the flesh was assumed. Despelder 1996, 551ff. Also see John Hick 1976/1985 and David Edwards 1999.

sometimes thought of as artificial life. Stories of golems created by practitioners of practical Kaballah, for example, and stories centered on the Frankenstein tale have a tight grip on our imaginations, so that when scientists talk about cloning, our emotions go directly to these stories. Our emotional imagination is where we first consider issues such as cloning, xenotransplantation, genetic manipulation, and other possibilities.

We can eventually hold emotional responses in abeyance while we rationally examine the ideas, but they are always on the periphery of our thoughts. Nussbaum argues that emotional response is a valuable contribution to the process of understanding moral claims and making sense of specific moral dilemmas. She claims ethical value for emotions on grounds that they involve both cognitive structure and "beliefs about how things are and what is important."[290]

Emotions at their best entail discriminating responses to what is valuable, good, and proper. And these responses are best developed and understood by the imagination of the novelist. Thus, following Aristotle, practical reasoning unaccompanied by emotion is not sufficient for practical wisdom. If we do not incorporate and consult emotion in attempts to understand life, we are preventing "a full rational judgment—for example by preventing an access to one's grief, or one's love, that is necessary for the full understanding of what has taken place when a loved one dies."[291] A richer understanding of this is made available to us by reading literature because it shows us features of our lives that

290. Nussbaum 1990, 40

291. Nussbaum 1990, 40–41.

we otherwise might not notice and so would not include in moral consideration. It creates the possibility of reflective consciousness in a way that allows us to grasp truth and understand ourselves.[292]

For these reasons, I begin this chapter looking at the stories of Homer and Hesiod, because in their tales we find the earliest examples in the West of ideas that form our emotional and imaginative responses to issues that touch on the existence of a boundary between the divine and the human realms. The boundary can be thought of in ancient literature as relating to issues of justice, or *dike*. I then turn to the Greek tragedians and then to Genesis.

I stop there not because it is the end of the discussion but because an examination of the continued development of this thesis is for another project. It could be argued that as the Christian era progressed the existence of divine/human boundaries became more apparent. The absolute transcendence of the divine was a strong element of the Protestant movement and with it arose a clear and fixed role for humanity: do not transgress God's domain; do not try to "play God." But, while Christianity often focused on what should not be done with God's creation, a much more complex struggle with this issue developed in Judaic thought. For Jews, the natural world is to be understood and improved. In the Jewish doctrine *of Tikkun Olam*, the world is imperfect and one of humanity's tasks is to assist in working toward its perfection.[293] As such, Jewish ethicists and

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292. Nussbaum 1990, 41ff.

293. *Tikkun Olam* is discussed in Frank and Leaman 1997, vol. 2, 478, 871. Also see Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*, 1993, Batya Stein, tr., Albany: State University of New York Press, 100, 112, 115–117, 126–128, 130–137, 139, 140–149, 194–200, 204–205, 208, 210; Blumenthal, David, 1988/1994, *God at the Center—Meditations on Jewish Spirituality*, Northvale, NJ/London: Jason Aronson,

commentators tend to argue for the acceptability of projects intended to enhance life and reduce suffering.[294] Thus, while God is transcendent and there are limitations on humanity's reach, there is little evidence that the tradition believes endeavors such as genetic manipulation are proscribed as unacceptably treading on God's province. This suggests that the provenance of the boundary issue in this context is not in the difference between humanity and divinity—because that exists in the Judaic no less than in the Christian tradition—but, rather, in something else. The difference between the two traditions as they incorporated into themselves elements of the Greek tradition may be in the perception of humanity's purpose, which will be explored in some of the following stories.

A recurrent image in many of these stories is the Promethean rebel, which provides the counterpoint to our fears about crossing divine boundaries. Prometheus turns up again and again in literature because he reminds us, as Protagoras did, that it may be there are no boundaries except those we hold in our emotions and our imaginations. Like Prometheus, Dionysus represents what is outside the norm, what is disruptive to established values. In some ways, the occurrence of an example outside the norm may speak to our understanding of the norm itself. For example, the common depiction in Greek art and literature of distinct domains preserved for men and for women is pointedly apparent by the uniqueness of Aspasia's appearance in ancient philosophy and her apparent

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xxvi–xxii, 22–27, 54–55, 66–68; Wurzburger, Walter, 1954, *Ethics of Responsibility*, Philadelphia/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 47ff.

294. For example, conservative Jewish medical ethicist Rabbi Elliot Dorff (Dorff 1998, 317) says of cloning that it is morally neutral, "Its moral valence depends upon how we use it. Its enormous potential to affect us both negatively and positively requires that we be especially alert to the uses we plan for it." Later, on page 319, Dorff is more clear: ". . . if used to cure disease or overcome infertility, it is a permissible activity for us as God's partners."

involvement in Athenian politics. She lived with Pericles as his mistress,[295] and shows up in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*[296] arguing with Socrates about human nature. In the *Acharnians*, Aristophanes parodies her critics who complain that she induced Pericles to start the Peloponnesian war.[297] This, at the same time, on Thucydides' account, that Pericles in his funeral oration says, "The greatest virtue of a woman lies in never being mentioned, either in praise or blame."[298] So, like Prometheus and Dionysus, Aspasia and other women seem at times to appear in poetry to provide alternative perspectives on cultural norms. As Parker suggests about the use of stories to point to cultural limitations, they may act by way of their poetic character as catharses for changing those norms.[299]

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a. Homer. The *Iliad*

*Summary*

The *Iliad* narrates the events of a few days near the end of the ten-year-long Trojan War, which was caused by Paris's seduction of Helen and her abduction from Sparta. It focuses on the Greek hero Achilleus's angry withdrawal from the battle after he is insulted by his commander, Agamemnon. The poem defies easy summarization. Books 2 to 23 cover only four days and two nights. Aristotle says about this that Homer is superior to other poets in that "He

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295. Blundell 1995, 148.

296. *Memorabilia* II.6.36.

297. *Acharnians* 515–39.

298. Thucydides 2.45.

299. Parker 1994, above, section II.a.

did not attempt to deal even with the Trojan war in its entirety, though it was a whole with a definite beginning and end—through a feeling apparently that it was too long a story to be taken in one view, or if not that, too complicated from the variety of incident in it."[300]

The son of Peleus and Thetis, Achilleus is mortal, and yet approaches divinity. He arrives at Troy leading fifty ships, wins many battles, and takes captives, including the woman Briseis.[301] He alone among the *Iliad's* characters keeps up the old practice of making elaborate offerings, including human victims, at a funeral. These and some of his other behaviors are condemned as evil,[302] especially his treatment of Hector's body after killing him.[303] He is condemned too for his ungovernable anger, which is the element on which the plot turns. He admits the weakness and fears it may override his feeling of pity for Troy's king, Priam.[304] At the height of his fury he spares no one and has no respect for the gods, allowing his anger to override justice.[305]

In Book 1, Agamemnon, the Greek commander, refuses to return his captive, Chryseis, to her father, Chryses, a priest of Apollo. Chryses had come to the Greek commander with the proper ransom, "carrying gifts beyond count and holding in his hands wound on a staff of gold the ribbons of Apollo who strikes

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300. *Poetics* 1459a.30–34.

301. *Iliad* 2.690.

302. *Iliad* 23.171.

303. *Iliad* 22.395.

304. *Iliad* 24.560.

305. *Iliad* 22.15–20.

from afar . . ."[306] He had said that the Greeks could proceed with the plundering of Troy, then return home victorious, "but may you give me back my own daughter and take the ransom, giving honour to Zeus' son who strikes from afar, Apollo."[307] Agamemnon resists and an undefined pestilence that follows for nine days is said to be the result of his unjust act.

Ravaged, Agamemnon's troops demand that he return Chryseis. He does, but in her stead he takes Briseis from Achilleus.[308] Furiously angry, Achilleus refuses to continue fighting and persuades his mother to seek Zeus's help in gaining revenge.[309] Zeus punishes Agamemnon by luring him into a losing battle with the Trojans, who take advantage of Achilleus's having left the fray. Seeing that his forces are overwhelmed, Agamemnon offers Achilleus payment for Briseis and asks him to return. Achilleus wrongly refuses the payment and declines to rejoin the fighting. Instead, he accedes to letting his friend Patroclus return to the battle to prevent the Trojans from burning the Greek camp. Patroclus is killed by Hector during the battle,[310] which kindles another anger in Achilleus, who returns to the battle, kills Hector in bloody revenge,[311] and then lets his wrath lead him over the edge when he improperly desecrates Hector's body.

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306. *Iliad* 1.13–15.

307. *Iliad* 1.18–21.

308. *Iliad* 1.134.

309. *Iliad* 1.352.

310. *Iliad* 16.786ff.

311. *Iliad* 19–22.

Two important events of the future—the killing of Achilleus by the combined efforts of Paris and Apollo and the brutal ravaging of Troy by the Greeks—occur after the poem ends, but they are depicted as inevitably following from the events of the poem.[312] It is left to the *Odyssey* to describe the fight over Achilleus's body, his funeral, and the mourning of Thetis.[313]

*Discussion*

The poem is an epic cautionary tale, warning that violations of rules established by both gods and men have consequences. It warns against overriding the dicta of divinities and oracles and gives clear proscription against behaving as if one's actions were as free of limits as the gods'. The first word of the poem in the original Greek is "wrath." It is usually translated as "anger," but some argue that "anger" does not convey the kind of lasting, festering, embittered hostility that Achilleus felt after Amamemnon's insult.[314]

Lattimore, however, uses "anger," and in the context of the next few lines manages to fill out the full horror brought upon the Greeks by Achilleus's response to Agamemnon:

> Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus
> and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the
> Achaians,
> hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls
> of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting
> of dogs, of all birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished
> since that time when first there stood in division of conflict Atreus' son the
> lord of men and brilliant Achilleus.[315]

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312. *Iliad* 22.359–60.

313. *Odyssey* 24.35ff.

314. Latacz 1996 makes this argument. Charles Segal in his 1971 study of the mutilation of corpses in Homer also uses "wrath."

315. *Iliad* 1.1–7.

That Agamemnon's captive woman was the daughter of a priest of Apollo provides the pivot around which much of the poem's improper action revolves. When the Greek commander unjustly refuses to return her for an appropriate ransom offered properly by Chryses, the insult to the priest becomes a violation of both human and divine conventions. With intimations back to Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia during the journey to Troy from Greece, the violation of customary standards leads from one disaster to another. Hero after hero fails to circumscribe their actions within limitations established by gods and human beings; they overstep boundaries and are destroyed.

When the nine-day-long pestilence scourged through the Greek camp, Agamemnon relented, but not without burying himself deeper into an abyss of future misery. "Raging, the heart within filled black to the brim with anger from beneath, but his two eyes showed like fire in their blazing," Agamemnon speaks bitterly to Kalchas, the seer who told him he must return the girl to stop the plague:

> Seer of evil: never yet have you told me a good thing.
> Always the evil things are dear to your heart to prophesy, . . .
> Now once more you make divination . . .
> because I for the sake of the girl Chryseis would not take
> the shining ransom; and indeed I wish greatly to have her
> in my own house; since I like her better than Klytaimestra
> my own wife, for in truth she is no way inferior,
> neither in build nor stature nor wit, not in accomplishment.[316]

Agamemnon says that despite this, he will return the woman, but he must be compensated by having Achilleus's captive woman. Speaking directly to Achilleus, he says,

> . . . I shall take the fair-cheeked Briseis,
> your prize, I myself going to your shelter, that you may learn well
> how much greater I am than you, and another man may shrink back from
> likening himself to me and contending against me.[317]

With this, Agamemnon haunts himself with such a series of misery-bringing errors that he is doomed. Beginning with the killing of his daughter, then the slight handed the priest of Apollo, the stupidity of angering Achilleus, and now the insult to his wife of saying he likes Briseis better than Clytemnestra—it is as if Agamemnon himself hands Clytemnestra the sword with which she will slaughter him. Achilleus would suffer as a result of the insanity of his anger; Agamemnon from the stupidities of his blindness. Their fates come because they lack the wisdom that comes from proper application of just action. Some Greek tales tell of undeserved suffering. Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis*, for example, depicts undeserved, uncompensated, and entirely unrelieved suffering. The enormity of Oedipus's suffering, as well, seems not deserved. But in Homer's hands, Agamemnon allows little claim for the undeserved dimension of suffering.

It is uncertain that we can from our perspective assign either moral responsibility or culpability within the framework of Homeric epic. Our assignment of guilt to Agamemnon is made through the near opacity of incommensurability. But the extent of impenetrability is not clear. How much can we think of this story as telling us something about human experience that endures, more or less unchanged over time? Bruno Snell argues convincingly

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316. *Iliad* 1.106–15.

317. *Iliad* 1.184–87.

that the framework of moral ideas within which the Greeks argued is very different than ours.[318]

When Achilleus decides against slaying Agamemnon for taking his captive woman, he stops, curbing his anger, not because of what we would think of as moral inhibition, but because it is to his advantage to obey Athena's order to do so, at least for the moment.[319] Snell says the common formulation in Homer of a man deliberating with himself is: "It seemed more profitable to him . . ."[320] What is good thus becomes what is predictably profitable:

> . . . it is sized up and weighed on the scale . . .Where there is profit, happiness cannot be far off, especially in a society which has as yet no knowledge of 'internal' happiness or bliss. In early Greece the happy man is *olbios*: he is in a state of plenty. His existence is not narrowly circumscribed; he basks in the sunshine of prosperity and splendour: he is *eudaimon*, i.e. he has by his side a good demon who helps him to succeed in everything he undertakes."[321]

When Homer says a man is good, *agathos*, he does not mean thereby that he is morally unobjectionable, Snell says, "but rather that he is useful, proficient, and capable of vigorous action. . . .Similarly *arete*, virtue, does not denote a moral property but nobility, achievement, success and reputation."[322]

And yet there is ambiguity here. Snell also says that these words, *agathos* and *arete* "have an unmistakable tendency toward the moral because, unlike 'happiness' or 'profit', they designate qualities for which a man may win the

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318. Snell 153–90.

319. *Iliad* 1.207.

320. Snell 1953, 156.

321. Snell 1953, 157,

respect of his whole community. In this way, Snell argues that Homer marked the beginning of a change in the conception of morals and of human personality that would continue with the early lyric poets, the dramatists, and then Socrates. "*Arete* is 'ability' and 'achievement,' characteristics which are expected of a 'good', an 'able' man, an *aner agathos*. From Homer to Plato and beyond these words spell out the worth of a man and his work. Any change in their meaning, therefore, would indicate a reassessment of values."[323] That change in meaning would become clear between the Homeric period and Plato. This was accomplished, Snell says, because the early motivations in calls to virtue—profit, happiness, and honor—were altered to adapt to new moral objective: "Extend the time range after which a profit is expected, and the notion of private benefit becomes invested with a moral, not to say almost philosophical complexion."[324] Snell argues, and Nussbaum makes a more recent claim, that these changes can be seen by examining the shifting sensibilities as they appear in literature.[325]

Arthur Adkins attempted to clarify the character of Greek ethical thinking by examining the Greek attitude to the concept of moral responsibility: "If we can discover why the concept of moral responsibility is so unimportant to the Greeks, we shall go far towards understanding the difference between our moral systems, and discovering the nature of each."[326]

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322. Snell 1953, 158. On *agathos* and the aristocratic ideal in antiquity, see Donlan 1999.

323. Snell 1953, 158–59.

324. Snell 1953, 160.

325. Also see Macintyre 1966.

326. Adkins 1960, 3. Also see Glenn Graber, dissertation, for a discussion arguing that the law conception of ethics was introduced by the Stoics and that along with this came notions of duty, obligation, and a religious reference to God as lawgiver.

His and related discussions represent more than mere philological quibbles, because they clarify the evolution of moral beliefs stretching from the archaic period in Greece to the point at which they contain the seeds of modern moral beliefs. The way the changes occurred, the examples of them in literature, and the force of their significance is important to understanding our experience of moral statements.

Adkins's solution to the problem he addressed is in his thesis that in Homer and for some time afterward, the Greeks assigned greatest value to the virtues attached to success rather than to intention. Adkins says this is most apparent in that the noun *arete* (excellence) and its adjective *agathos* are "the most powerful words of commendation," and the noun *kakotes* and its adjective *kakos* are the corresponding words of denigration.[327] *Arete*, Adkins says, is typically used to denote "courage' or 'skill' and primarily in a competitive context:[328] " . . . *agathos* and *arete* were reckoned by results rather than intention . . ."[329]

J.L. Creed argues against Adkins on this, asserting that Adkins's claims for the near universality of meaning in *arete* and *kakotes* are unfounded: "Firstly there are obvious dangers in too confidently constructing a scheme of the development of moral values in the fifth century on the basis of the scanty evidence which we possess, and in supposing that we can infer very much from

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327. Adkins 1973, 218.

328. Adkins 1960, 30–1, 44–5, 158.

329. Adkins 1960, 157.

the relative frequency of certain terms used in certain ways."[330] On this and other arguments, Creed mistakes Adkins in that he finds in Adkins more certainty that Adkins himself claims. In a response to Creed, Adkins says that Creed's criticism refers to someone who "manifestly holds views which differ in a number of important respects from my own."[331]

Adkins argues that some Greeks value justice "because and only because (or if and only if) the gods reward it."[332] He points to *Works and Days* and to Aeschylus's *Eumenides* for support in the thesis that justice is valued because of the fear of divine punishment. As we shall see, the issue also arises for several important figures in the *Iliad*.

The central day[333] described in the poem tells much of how Achilleus's wrath led to such enormity of misery and destruction. On that day, the Trojan hero Hector storms the Greek wall, reaches their ships, and then kills Achilleus's friend Patroclus, strips away his armor, and tries to seize the body "in order that he might cut off the head from the shoulders and drag the corpse to give to the dogs of Troy."[334] His victory and the killing of an enemy are tainted, however, because he ignored the will of Zeus. Hector had been told by Zeus that he would grant him the power to kill "til he makes his way to the strong-benched vessels, until the sun goes down and the blessed darkness comes over."[335] But Hector

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330. Adkins 1960, 218.

331. Adkins 1975, 209–220.

332. Adkins 1975, 210. This is also discussed in the section below, Hesiod.

333. *Iliad* 11.1–18.239–40.

334. *Iliad* 17.125–7.

335. *Iliad* 11.192–94, also at 11.207–09.

ignored the order and rejected the advice of his brother, the seer Poulydamas,[336] who had warned that he should follow Zeus's guidance. Instead, Hector said, "Poulydamas, these things that you argue please me no longer . . ."[337] Instead, at the moment when the sun goes down, Hector says pridefully, "But now, when the son of devious-devising Kronos has given me the winning of glory by the ships, to pin the Achaians on the sea, why, fool, no longer show these thoughts to our people"[338].

Frenzied with grief over the death of his friend,[339] Achilleus rejoins Agamemnon, routs the Trojans, and angrily kills Hector.[340] His actions revenge the death of Patroclus but Achilleus does not stop with proper vengeance. He also desecrates Hector's body, a violation of just standards as certainly as Creon violated divine laws by refusing to bury Polyneices.

In another of a series of failures caused by exceeding the limits of human action, Hector's death meant he had failed as the protector of his people, and he understands how his failure to respect limitations led to defeat: "Now, since by my own recklessness I have ruined my people, I feel shame before the Trojans . . ."[341] Earlier, Hector's prayer for his son reveals both the ancient morality that praised heroic glory and fame and the cause of future events: ". . .grant that this boy, who is my son, may be as I am, pre-eminent among the Trojans . . . and let

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336. *Iliad* 12.235–6.

337. *Iliad* 18.285.

338. *Iliad* 18.293–5.

339. *Iliad* 18.15ff.

340. *Iliad* 19–22.

him kill his enemy and bring home the bloodied spoils, and delight the heart of his mother."[342] But Hector, like Achilleus later, was unable to stop with the limitations set by Zeus. Had he done so, his actions would have been considered proper and his reputation would have been enhanced. But he thought divine proscriptions did not apply to him, ignored the seer's warning, and let bloodlust override caution.

Achilleus fared no better. His very nature has been constantly difficult. His goddess-mother Thetis laments that from his birth he has been set apart by hard fate: "Now it has befallen that your life must be brief and bitter beyond all men's, To a bad destiny I bore you in my chambers."[343] In a study of the theme of mutilation of corpses in the *Iliad*, Charles Segal argues that Achilleus's troublesome nature reflects the polarities of Homer's heroic world: "immense capacities for love and for hatred, social responsibility and self-centered recklessness, devotion to personal ties and tragic isolation." Like Oedipus, Achilleus's nature commits him to suffering and the outrage he commits by mutilating Hector's corpse is a manifestation of this.

The *Iliad* ends with Hector's funeral and much of the last third of the poem is dominated by the treatment and maltreatment of the dead, just as the first few lines of the poem refer to the mutilation of corpses by "dogs, and all the birds."[344] Segal argues against some readings of Homer that suggests the treatment of

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341. *Iliad* 22.1–5.

342. *Iliad* 6.476–81.

343. *Iliad* 1.417–18.

344. *Iliad* 1.4–5.

Hector's body was an acceptable part of war.[345] Samuel Bassett, for example, claims that the body of an enemy slain in battle is the property of the slayer, and no stigma attaches to its maltreatment: ". . . It was entirely in accord with the Homeric code of honor to outrage the body of a foeman . . . in order to avenge the death of a dear friend or kinsman."[346] Segal says no, Homer offers the moral perspective of his own post-heroic age[347] and Bassett errs by "confusing Achilleus' justification in killing Hector with the question of his excesses in treating the body . . . as he does."[348] And even if it were "legally" justified, Segal says, it is not made less horrible: "Creon, we may recall, was legally justified in exposing the body of Polyneices."[349]

More importantly for Segal, the mutilation points to Homer's real concern: It is part of the tragedy of the human condition that passions—"the greed of Agamemnon, the love and intensity of Achilles, the patriotism and social sense of Hector—lead to unexpected disasters of a magnitude far beyond what the original action intended or deserved."[350] In this way, Achilles' passionate and extreme nature gets caught in a situation not entirely of his own making that leads to the shattering in his life of what is most precious and the alteration of

345. Segal 1971, 12 and elsewhere

346. Bassett 1993, 54.

347. Segal 1971, 12.

348. Segal 1971, 15.

349. Segal 1971, 15.

350. Segal 1971, 16.

"what is noblest in himself turned to bitterness and hatred,"[351] and for this he curses his anger[352] and the war itself.[353]

Anger, violence, and outrage build in intensity throughout the *Iliad*, ending with the killing and mutilation of Hector. His corpse is stabbed[354] and then Achilleus "devised his deeds of outrage, piercing the ankles to tie the body behind his chariot.[355] This, combined with Priam's vision earlier in book 22 of his sons killed, his daughters dragged away, his chambers plundered, and himself torn by dogs, provides an image of what Segal says encompasses "all Troy, and in a sense all of civilization."[356] The wrongness of Achilleus's behavior leads in books 23 and 24 to the intervention of the gods—first Apollo, who feels pity for Hector,[357] and then to the others, including Zeus.[358] Through book 24, Homer shifts the mood from violence to reconciliation and to an expression of Achilleus coming to better understand and control his anger.

When he lifts Hector's body on to the bier, we see again the gentler side of Achilleus, but only in conjunction with his violence because his motive is the fear that Priam, Hector's father, will so lament his son's treatment that Achilleus's

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351. Segal 1971, 17.
352. *Iliad* 18.107–11.
353. *Iliad* 16.98–101.
354. *Iliad* 22.375.
355. *Iliad* 22.361–63.
356. Segal 1971, 43.
357. *Iliad* 24.19.
358. *Iliad* 24.75-76.

wrath will again be aroused and lead him to kill the old man.[359] It suggests that despite the events of book 24, which foretells establishment of a potentially more humane order, a tension still exists that holds future events constantly on the edge of breaking into wrathful madness and blood violence. Achilleus's violence has been excessive and is a violation of human laws, natural laws, and divine laws. He understands this when he thinks with dispassionate realism,[360] but he also knows that it remains as possibility. The tension that exists in Achilleus is similar to the tension of motivations that exists in all human life. There is little ambiguity in the *Iliad* as to the deserved nature of the heroes' sufferings. Where ambiguity arises is in the question of whether human beings have the capacity to control the actions that lead to suffering, or whether it is merely a matter of whether they received allotments from both urns or only from the urn of unhappiness.[361]

Iliad 24 suggests an ambiguity in ancient values regarding Achilleus's treatment of Hector and Priam. In various other events in the Iliad, requests are made by supplicants on the battlefield but MacLeod points out that they are always rejected or cut short, and the suppliant killed.[362] This feature of war is deliberately stressed by Homer. But in Book 24, the supplication is accepted:

> And this act is far more than the fulfilment of a conventional duty; for the values of humanity and fellow-feeling implicit in the convention are fully and profoundly represented in the scene between Achilles and Priam.[363]

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359. *Iliad* 24.583–86.

360. *Iliad* 24.542.

361. *Iliad* 24.527–33.

362. *Iliad* 6.45ff., 10.454ff., 11.130ff., 20.463ff., 22.338ff.

363. MacLeod 1982, 16.

Also, the description of Hector's death and concerns about its treatment are similarly exceptional. MacLeod points out that on the battlefield opponents are taunted that they will not be lamented or buried.[364] It is assumed in Homer's harsh description of war, MacLeod adds, that anyone who dies in battle will be prey for dogs and birds.

MacLeod says that both the Odyssey and the Iliad suggest a conception of tragic poetry as: "human passion and blindness, which lead to suffering, death and loss of burial; behind it all, the will of the supreme god, and above it all, the Olympians."[365] When Achilleus explains Priam's troubles he knows his death will come soon and says that human beings cannot avoid some sufffering and that they are always under the control of the gods.[366] MacLeod says

> Here . . . there is endurance and sadness, but no bitterness, no railing or cringing: the passage displays in fact a virtue often denied to the archaic Greeks, humility. This is also the fullest and deepest expression in words of Achilles' pity for the suppliant; for pity, as Homer and the Greeks represent it, is a sense of shared human weakness. And it is pity which is at the heart of Homer's conception of poetry.

Zeus and other gods occasionally exhibit a measure of pity or kindness, MacLeod allows, but it is with the feelings of a detached observer. They are generally "the heedless dispensers of misfortune to men. This may seem contradictory, but no more so than human contradictions. And whatever characteristics the gods exhibit, human choices must still be made within whatever framework the gods arrange:

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364. *Iliad* 4.237, 8.379–80, 11.395, 11.453–54, 13.831–32, 16.836.

365. MacLeod 1982, 8.

366. *Iliad* 24.525–51.

> . . . whether it is the gods' will that men pity and respect each oter, or whether men live together in subjection to gods who deal out good and evil at their inscrutable pleasure, in either case men cannot afford to be cruel or indifferent among themselves.[367]

As we shall see in the *Odyssey*, one aspect of this ambiguous tension is between the several parts of human nature, but another is the tension between human actions and motivations on the one hand and, on the other, the result of fate, allotment from the urns, or what "the gods have spun out for wretched mortals."[368] For Homer, human life must include passion and suffering. The gods can see and understand all of existence, seeing the vicissitudes and uncertainties of human life usually without feeling either passion or suffering, but for human beings, meaning arises out of the possibility of vulnerability, failure, and loss. Odysseus will choose this, taking his chances with the urns rather than resting in the certain eternal dispassion of immortality. Macleod says the Iliad is a great work

> Not least because it can speak authentically for pity or kindness or civilization without showing them victorious in life. Its humanity does not float on shallow optimism; it is firmly and deeply rooted in an awareness of human reality and suffering.[369]

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367. MacLeod 1982, 15.

368. *Iliad* 24.525.

369. Macleod 1982, 16.

c. Homer. The *Odyssey*

*Summary*

The *Odyssey* is the story of Odysseus's wanderings during the ten years after the Trojan war. The son and successor of Laertes, king of Ithaca, Odysseus is the husband of Penelope and father of Telemachus. He is known from the *Iliad* to give good counsel[370] and was a great hero of the war. During his journey he visits strange lands, including the home of Aeolus, who gives him a sack containing all the winds except the one that will take him home. He travels to the Laestrygonians,[371] then to Aiaia, the home of Circe, where he is told that to return home he must first sail to Hades and consult the ghost of the seer Teiresias. Teiresias tells him that when he reaches home he is to sacrifice to Poseidon in a place where salt is unknown and an oar is mistaken for a winnowing fan. The sacrifice will appease Poseidon's anger for Odysseus's blinding of his son Polyphemus during the hero's stop at the island of the Cyclopes.[372] He travels on, past the Sirens, sails between Scylla and Charybdis and lands on the island where the cattle of the Sun pasture. His men eat the cattle, which brings revenge from Helios, who destroys their ship with a thunderbolt when they leave the island.

Odysseus escapes, drifts to the island of the nymph Calypso, and stays with her for seven years until she lets him go when he declines her offer of

370. *Iliad* 19.154ff.

371. *Odyssey* 10.19ff.

372. *Odyssey* 9.39ff.

immortality so that he can return to his wife.[373] His boat is wrecked by Poseidon but Odysseus survives and swims to shore at Scheria in the land of the Phaeacians. Battered by the sea, he is exhausted when he arrives from his adventure. He meets Nausicaa, daughter of the king, who helps him get to the city, which marks his return to civilization. From the land of the Phaeacians, he travels toward his home at Ithaca.

The tale is a stark contrast with the Iliad where the setting was the single context of the Trojan War. In the *Odyssey*, the imaginative landscape constantly changes, moving from adventure to adventure with monsters, nymphs, goddesses, a pig farm, magical gardens, and struggles with strange beings.

The second half of the Odyssey is an account of his eventual return home, where with the help of Athena he reclaims his position as leader of Ithaca. Disguised as a beggar, he enters his palace,[374] kills his wife's suitors,[375] and is reunited with Penelope. The attempted vengeance by kinsmen of the suitors is stopped by Athena, who makes peace between them.

*Discussion*

The *Odyssey* is the story of a man being tested in various ways, including tests of his willingness to act properly in difficult situations and with temptation at hand to entice him into improper action. He must be patient, careful, smart, and courageous. Homer's Odysseus has heroic stature and reputation, loses it during his travels, survives, and returns to civilization and humanity, restoring

373. *Odyssey* 5.43ff.

374. *Odyssey* 16.1.

order in his life, at home, and in the minds of those who hear the poem of his adventure.

Odysseus's story is told in the form of three primary trials. The first is the boar hunt that marks his passage from adolescence to manhood.[376] The second is his journeying back through the unknown by way of the Phaeacians, beginning when at the end of book five he escapes from the battering he has taken in the sea, emerging among Nausicaa's Phaeacian maidens. It is at that point that he moves from the world of his adventures to a life of civilization with the Phaeacians.[377] The third is when he returns home to reclaim his wife and family and begins the process of moving toward the end of his life.[378] With the movement through the three trials, or stages, the journey becomes a reflection of the experience of a human life.

Like the *Iliad,* the *Odyssey* is a cautionary tale. It says divinities and oracles should be honored and that human beings live best when they follow the guidelines of proper behavior: showing hospitality, being loyal, and respecting the duties related to gods, to family, to others, and to citizenship. After leaving Calypso and declining her offer of immortality,[379] he is shipwrecked, left with no possessions but his wits. The unfolding of the Calypso episode demonstrates that Odysseus understands his limits and will honor his obligations. He is not a god,

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375. *Odyssey* 21–22.

376. *Odyssey* 19.392ff. Also see Rubin and Sale 1983, 141ff. for a discussion of Greek myth employing the hunt as the image denoting passage to manhood.

377. This part of the story begins at the end of book five, but the central narrative of Odysseus among the Phaeacians is in books nine through twelve.

378. *Odyssey* 13.

and one of the results of this is that even when he thinks he has acted justly, with *dike,*[380] in continuing his journey toward home and family, he is subject to bad luck and the frailties of mortality. He experiences what Nussbaum describes as "the peculiar beauty of human excellence"[381]—its vulnerability to aging, death, and the contingencies of life. His life will not play out in trying to become what he is not; he will return to his aging wife rather than be with the eternally beautiful Calypso because that is the nature of one who fully understands what it is to be human and to live well, and he accepts what suffer he finds along the way.

After leaving Calypso, his ship is wrecked by Poseidon's stormy seas, and twenty days later he washes up on the shores of the land of the Phaeacians. This liminal episode symbolizes the transition that began with the end of the war in Troy, continued with the imaginary, nearly divine world of his fairy-tale adventures, and concludes with his return home to Ithaca and family. The movement is from the loss of identity to regaining it, from wilderness to civilization, youth to death, birth to death to rebirth. When he visits the dead from Hades[382] after giving up the opportunity for immortality with Calypso,[383] he is made aware of what it is to be human and mortal; it is a part of his psychological maturity, a process that is completed when he understands his place as a mortal and as a husband, father, and leader. The various movements symbolized by his journeys are partly designed to illustrate both the nature of

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379. *Odyssey* 5.214–220.

380. A discussion of dike is below, in II.d, Hesiod.

381. Nussbaum 1986, 2.

382. *Odyssey* 11.50ff.

383. *Odyssey* 5.100.

being human and the differences from life as a god. They depict the necessity of human responsibility and vulnerability and they suggest the sorting out of what is important from what is not. The transitions between places, or stages, is represented by the "great abyss of the sea."[384] His sojourn with the Phaeacians is an in-between time, a liminal stopping over in a place not entirely human yet almost so.[385] He is moving back toward mortality, but needs time to understand what that means. Part of this understanding is depicted in his decision not to marry Nausicaa, a young girl who is ready for marriage. Odysseus recognizes that, like his offer from Calypso, it would mean rejection of his place in Ithaca with Penelope. Nausicaa is youthful, beautiful, and offers him a return to youth but Odysseus understands who he is and his stage in life; it is not with Nausicaa. Understanding is another reassertion of his mortal nature, and a recognition of his approaching death.[386] An important theme from book five on is Odysseus's knowledge of his mortality, and that he accepts that this means he must suffer.[387] Another indication of his recognition of the limitations of humanness is when Alcinous suggests that Odysseus might be a god in disguise.[388] Odysseus replies that he is very mortal and has endured the suffering and the experiences of being human.[389]

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384. *Odyssey* 5.203.

385. *Odyssey* 5.35.

386. The idea that humanness is in many ways defined by mortality and an awareness of death recurs in Greek literature. See, for example, *Iliad* 6.145–49, Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* 1–3, and *OC* 1224–28.

387. *Odyssey* 5.221–24.

388. *Odyssey* 7.208ff.

389. *Odyssey* 7.211–14.

Throughout, Athena assists Odysseus in his efforts to understand—his efforts to reach whatever next stage he is approaching. As such, Segal says she represents in Odysseus his rationality as well as

> his clear and integrated vision of himself as the man that he is, and therefore the reality of his bond with Ithaca and human life. She is the vitality and resiliency of his human spirit that has not ceased to work on his behalf . . ."[390]

Many of the delimitations suggested by the *Odyssey* may point to social, political, and religious changes in the culture—in that Greeks in the late archaic period were altering their relationships with each other, with the embryonic *polis*, and with the gods. G. S. Kirk believes the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, combined with stories about Prometheus, suggest a stabilizing of the relationship with the gods.[391] David Tandy argues that both poems, along with Hesiod's *Theogony*, serve the political purposes of emerging economic forces.[392] He asserts that the poems are tools designed to convince those who may not benefit from the new concentrations of wealth that they should appreciate the changes.

Tandy's thesis is that population pressures and changes in the economic systems led to increased concentrations of wealth as well as the changed role and status of wealth. For example, before the changes, wealth had followed status, after the changes status followed wealth. These and other alterations, he says, led to the beginning of private property, land alienations, debt, and the polis. They also created increased solidarity among the leaders of Greek communities with one

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390. Segal 1994, 16.

391. Kirk 1970/1971, 175.

392. Tandy 1997, 190ff and elsewhere.

another, "simultaneously separating them as a class from the rest of the members of their communities." The most important tool in creating acceptance of the changes, including the new class consciousness, was epic poetry.

Tandy says the *Iliad,* the *Odyssey,* and *Theogony* abet "the attempt to disguise the recent radical change in the economic infrastructure"[393] and seek to show that the nonelite will reap benefits from the changes, or at least should go along without complaint. He says elements in the poems also divert attention from the economic and political changes as the cause of social upheaval spreading throughout Greece.[394]

His thesis suggests that, like Odysseus in recognizing his appropriate limits and responsibilities, those who heard the Homeric stories were meant to understand their proper role in the system. As the gods establish boundaries and roles for humanity and Homer shows that this is as it should be, so the economic system establishes appropriate boundaries and roles for workers and Homer suggests this too is good. Those who see this are happy, and, presumably, those who do not see risk social sanctions just as those who violate the order established by gods risk divine sanctions. In the *Iliad,* for example, workers are shown "gleefully" toiling, and heroes are said to be "good men who deserve their wealth," just as, Tandy says about the late eighth century, "the big men of today have much wealth: therefore they are good men and deserve to have it and probably more."[395] The epics attempted to equate heroes of the past and the

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393. Tandy 1997, 191.

394. Tandy 1997, 192.

395. Tandy 1997, 191–92.

leaders of the present."[396] In the *Theogony,* Hesiod likens powerful community figures, such as the *basileus*—or high-born leader—not merely to heroes, but to gods:

> All the people watch [the *basileus*] as he decides law cases with straight *dikai*; and he, speaking surely, would put a stop to even a great *neikos*. For therefore there are *basilees* with wise hearts, for when the people are being misled in the *agora,* they easily settle cases that might bring harm, moving them with soothing words. When he goes through the assembly, they greet him as a god, and he is conspicuous among those gathered.[397]

Thus, recitations of the *Theogony* and the Homeric poems are a useful tool that supports and gives near heroic status if not semi-divinity to the economically and politically powerful elite. The poems' authority is established by Eumaeus the swineherd, who says a good singer, or teller of the poems, learns the songs from the gods.[398] The instructions are divinely inspired.

Tandy says that unlike *Theogony* and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* the archaic oral tradition that includes Hesiod's *Works and Days* expressed an antiaristocratic strain. Similar sentiment shows up in Archilochus, Tyrtaeus, Solon, Xenophanes, and others.[399] He says *Works and Days* was a "critical and negative response" to the changes and was "an overt rejection of polis hegemony . . ."[400] But in the *Theogony,* like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* "the public expression

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396. Tandy 1997, 230–31.

397. *Theogony* 84–92, tr. Tandy.

398. *Odyssey* 17.518–19.

399. See Donlan 1973, esp. 146–48.

400. Tandy 1997, 232.

of such sentiment is demonstrably ill-advised."[401] When Thersites in the *Iliad* seeks to complain about the *basilees* and of unfair acquisition of wealth, Homer viciously points out that he is the ugliest of the Achaeans,

> the basest man who came to Troy. He was bandy-legged, and lame in one foot. His two shoulders were hunched over, bent in over the chest, and above them was a pointed head, and a thin patch of fuzz grew on it.[402]

Tandy says Thersites' appearance is shown to match his judgment, "and his punishment is an object lesson for those who would emulate him" in criticizing the leaders.[403] The message here, as in *Theogony* and the *Odyssey* is that those who cross proscribed boundaries will be destroyed.

The crossing of boundaries as an example of improper *dike* has little to do in the *Odyssey* with moral blame or praise; more often it has to do with "the way things should be done" or "the way things are done,"[404] as when Penelope describes Odysseus as "never outrageous at all to any man," whereas "that is a way (*dike*) divine kings have, one will be hateful to a certain man, and favor another . . ."[405]

Those who find a moral component to *dike* in Homer point to instances when improper behavior is justly stopped, especially in the punishment of those who fail to show hospitality. This includes the actions of the suitors, who abuse Odysseus's property, seduce his servants, try to seduce his wife, and attempt to

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401. Tandy 1997, 194ff.

402. *Iliad* 2.216–19, tr. Tandy.

403. Tandy 1997, 196.

404. A more extensive discussion of *dike* is in the following section, III.*c*, *Hesiod*.

kill his son. Their payment is severe. They are killed so that "you know in your heart, and say to another, that good dealing is better by far than evil dealing."[406] Their behavior has offended both man and gods: ". . . fearing neither the immortal gods who hold wide heaven nor any resentment sprung from men to be yours in future."[407]

Until the suitors are punished, there is uncertainty in the story about whether the gods care about right and wrong in the world. On their death, Laertes is relieved: "Father Zeus, there are gods indeed upon tall Olympus, if truly the suitors have had to pay for their reckless violence."[408] When Odysseus resolves the problem, order is restored, justice observed, and the boundaries of humanity's proper limit is set.

*Odyssey* 11 depicts the final human limit, providing a glimpse of "Homeric" Greek beliefs in an afterlife and an account of how the dead should be treated. When heroes die in the epics, their *psychai* (souls) leave their bodies and go to the "next life" in the underworld. Robert Garland describes their status in Hades:

> The Homeric dead are distinguished from their living counterparts in their lack of strength (*menos*), an attribute which they share with dreams. . . . The Homeric dead lack not only *menos*, but also the full command of their faculties. Achilles remarks that although there is soul (*psyche*) and image (*eidolon*) in Hades "the *phrenes* (wits) do not exist at all.[409]

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405. *Odyssey* 4.690–1.

406. *Odyssey* 22.373-4.

407. *Odyssey* 22.39–40.

408. *Odyssey* 24.351–2.

409. Garland 1985, 1. Also, on Greek views of the afterlife and the underworld, see John Kerrigan 1996, 34ff.

There are options to one's *psyche* ending up in Hades. Hesiod says that those who died at Thebes and Troy go to the Islands of the Blessed.[410] He says others just go into the ground.[411] Always, however, their bodies must be buried, and as Antigone and Teiresias warned Creon, failure to honor this sacred law begs disaster. When Odysseus encounters the *psyches* populating Hades, one of them is his former companion, Elpenor. His body had been left behind in Circe's palace on the island of Aiaia, "unburied and unwept" because Odysseus had to leave quickly for his journey to Hades.[412] Elpenor beseeches Odysseus to return to Aiaia when he leaves Hades so that Odysseus can burn his body and build a grave mound for him, warning that otherwise his unburied body might bring the gods' curse upon Odysseus.[413]

Like the visitation from the souls of the dead, the Calypso episode is central to the *Odyssey* because it portrays both the vulnerability of human beings and the necessity of risking that vulnerability to live properly a life of human excellence. For Odysseus, this vulnerability is expressed in the movement of his life after the Trojan War. When the war ended, he was a great hero, courageous and highly regarded. During his ten-year journey his closeness to death and destruction causes him in various ways to make choices that lead to his losing his reputation for proper action. The failure to bury Elpenor is one of these. He encounters the souls of Elpenor and the other dead, not as a soul himself, but

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410. *WD* 161–73.

411. *WD* 172–73.

412. *Odyssey* 11.50ff.

413. *Odyssey* 11.70–74.

fully human and alive, and so doubly violates usually forbidden limits. But his decision to forego an eternity of divine immortality to return to home, family, and obligations was the move that ensured the rekindling of his reputation.

Ronald Hall argues that Odysseus's choice was a transcending moment for him.[414] In a discussion comparing Odysseus to Abraham, Hall draws on Kierkegaard's account,[415] of the story of the binding of Isaac[416] to claim that compared to Abraham's choice, Odysseus acted admirably. Abraham chooses God over his son; Odysseus chooses human existence over immortality. Two dramatically different choices, one seeking what Nussbaum calls external transcendence,[417] the other seeking the human heroism of internal transcendence.

Implicit in Odysseus's choice, Hall says, is an indication of what we value about being human, and mortal:

> The human condition of contingency also calls for courage, for resourcefulness, for love, hope, and trust, the human virtues we admire, the virtues we reckon as human excellences. It is just these features of our existence that give it its intrinsic worth. Yet it is just these features that would be lost in the timeless, changeless, deathless eternity of divine transcendence. What we admire in Odysseus's choice of his own human finitude, a choice he makes at the price of his own mortality, are precisely those qualities of finite contingent existence that make human existence itself of intrinsic value. [418]

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414. Hall 1994, 363ff. Hall's essay is a discussion of Nussbaum's *Fragility* (1990), *Love's Knowledge* (1990), and *Therapy of Desire* (1994).

415. *Fear and Trembling* 1983. The story of the binding of Isaac is discussed throughout.

416. Genesis 22.

417. Nussbaum 1986, 200ff.

418. Hall 1994, 364. Also see Ronald Hall, 2000.

Who is right here? Hall wonders. Abraham, who is willing to turn his back on the world and his only son? Or Odysseus, who will not turn his back on his earthly home, his aging wife, or his humanness? "Must we resist the lure of transcendence for the sake of our humanity? . . . how do we reckon with the human lure to divinity, with the human temptation to want to transcend itself, without destroying the human, without destroying ourselves?"[419]

In a discussion of Euripides' *Hecuba*, Nussbaum says humans are the beings that can most easily cease to be human by transcending their nature, "either by moving (Platonically) upwards towards the self-sufficiency of the divine, or by slipping downward towards the self-sufficiency of doggishness." She says "the difference between the two is not altogether obvious, since both involve the closing-off of important human things."[420] In Euripides, Hecuba alters from a woman with kindly intentions to become a vengeful, bloodthirsty dog with fiery eyes. She cuts herself off from her humanness, disregarding the usual parameters of trust and hospitality so that she can destroy to satisfy a revenge lust. In Genesis, Abraham renounces the bonds of familial obligation to reach upwards toward the divine. In the *Odyssey*, the hero consciously renounces both the move downward and the move upward.

Transcendence of the sort Odysseus demonstrates seeks not to exceed or transcend his humanness, "but instead to rise in moral and political excellence, the transcendence of practical wisdom. It aims to deepen our sense of

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419. Hall 1994, 364.

420. Nussbaum 1986, 417.

humanness, makes us more aware of the riches of our human existence."[421] Rather than closing off what is important about being human, Odysseus embraces it, escaping shipwreck and misery to continue his journey home, clear away those who have set it askew, and return it to the orderly ways of one who lives a proper human life.

In this way, Plato's project is a counterpoint to Homer's *Odyssey*. Plato seeks transcendence of humanness much in the way Abraham does. Plato in the early and middle dialogues seeks

> a *techne*, a science or art of control, that would guard against *tuche*, the human condition of being subject to ungoverned contingency, to luck, that which simply happens. . . . Such exposure makes us vulnerable to pain, uncertainty, vulnerable to chance, to loss, the ultimate such loss being death, and hence to grief. He wanted to find a way to make human existence safer, more predictable, more under control.[422]

Plato's *techne*, then, is an attempt to gain control over luck, to manage a life so that it has predictive ability and control over future events. Plato is thus searching for a human goodness without fragility, without vulnerability to mortality, or to the lack of understanding that results from deceptive appearances. If Plato's project is an example of external transcendence, then Odysseus's courage in his choice is an example of internal transcendence.

Plato's version of aspiring to live well is akin to living as a god. Hall says Plato seems to want to exist "aloof from the concerns of the earth, of bodily existence, from appearances, from passions, to live without need, without

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421. Nussbaum 1990, 379.

422. Nussbaum 1986, 200ff.

dependency on others."[423] Alcibiades resists Plato on this, raging "against the lure of the inhuman," Hall says. "To live as a stone, as a god, frees us from the conflicts of passion, from the vulnerability to loss, from dependence, but at what price? For Alcibiades, the price is too dear."[424] We will see in the *Bacchae*[425] the tragic result of joining with a god and having access to god-like powers when Agave slaughters her son and rips apart his body. The best human life, Euripides suggests in the tale, is the life lived within the confines of mortal power and experience.

Alcibiades thus follows the *Bacchae*, Greek tragedy generally, and Odysseus in arguing against Plato's project. They have in common, at the least, as Hall puts it, "ambivalent feelings toward godlike existence." Plato thinks the gods are better, superior, because they lack human limitations. Homer's Odysseus and the tragedians argue that to want to live as gods would entail forfeiting human existence, which would be to lose what humans consider best about themselves. Hall explains this in terms of our ability to respond to suffering:

> If justice requires us to recognize the needs of others, to have compassion for them, to want to put a stop to suffering where we can, then humans are better off than the gods in terms of their capacity to understand, to pursue, and to achieve justice.[426]

Nussbaum agrees, saying humans "know how to deal with suffering, and their morality is a response to the fact of suffering. The gods are better because they

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423. Hall 1994, 366.

424. Hall 1994, 366.

425. Below, section III.i.

can simply overlook, look over, the sufferings of human beings, without involvement or response."[427]

But in important ways, the gods seem worse off in comparison to humans, Nussbaum says. The gods seem to "long . . . for that which displays effort and longing, need and striving, achievement against odds. . . . So the transcendent ones long, it seems for a certain sort of transcendence: for transcendence of their own limit, which is to lack limit and therefore to be incapable of virtue."[428]

It takes no courage to live as a god. It does take courage to live as Odysseus does. He needs both resourcefulness and courage to survive, which brings him a heroic standing that gods can never enjoy. Calypso is drawn to this about Odysseus and is reluctant to see him go. When Plato and others with projects similar to his succumb to the lure of what Nussbaum calls external transcendence, it "is the lure to depart human life altogether. . . to leave behind altogether the constitutive conditions of our humanity and to seek for a life that is really the life of another sort of being."[429]

On this account, Plato's project is a variety of hubris in its failure to comprehend the kind of life one should properly live, and to live within its limits: "There is a kind of striving that is appropriate to a human life; and there is a kind of striving that consists in trying to depart from that life to another life." Correctly understood, Nussbaum asserts, "the injunction to avoid hubris is not a

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426. Hall 1994, 368.

427. Nussbaum 1990, 375.

428. Nussbaum 1990, 377.

429. Nussbaum 1990, 379.

penance or denial—it is an instruction as to where the valuable things for us are to be found."[430]

The part of a good human life that is most difficult for human beings to encompass is the struggle to at the same time experience human love, human joy, human victories, as well as to understand its limits, including its mortality. Nussbaum expresses this by asking whether, given what is best about human life, one should not want the people one loves to live forever? "Yes and no," she concludes. This tension is what Hall argues is the best part of the best human life.[431]

Hall criticizes Nussbaum for suggesting that the Greeks had the idea of transcendence and infinity, which he argues they didn't, largely on grounds that the Greeks lacked the conception of the universe as a creation. I doubt that this is quite accurate, but it is of little consequence because the upshot of where he goes with it is clearly misguided. He asserts that remarks Nussbaum makes about the "positive contribution" of Plato's aspiration to divinity—"a kind of striving to make things better, a striving to live a noble life devoted to truth, goodness, and beauty"—make it seem that "what she really admires in Plato is what could well fit into her notion 'internal transcendence,' that human form of transcendence that deepens our humanity, and keeps our ordinary lives from degenerating into banality."[432]

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430. Nussbaum 1990, 381.

431. Hall 1994, 368.

432. Hall 1994, 370, note 9.

But Hall mistakes Nussbaum. She admires certain aspects of Plato's project—striving to live a noble life, for example—but the larger goal of what Plato seeks she finds too sterile, too impoverished: "part of the peculiar beauty of human excellence just is its vulnerability. . . . Human excellence is seen . . . pervasively in the Greek poetic tradition, as something whose very nature it is to be in need, a growing thing in the world that could not be made invulnerable and keep its own peculiar fineness."[433]

Nussbaum does not imply here that a life is better the more fragile it is, the more risks it takes; rather, she explains in a later essay that for the Greeks "any human life that is going to be sufficiently rich in value must incur risks; that the attempt to minimize risk is bound to result in an impoverishment of life.[434]

What Nussbaum rejects as "incoherent" is the "aspiration to leave behind altogether the constitutive conditions of our humanity, and to seek for a life that is really the life of another sort of being—as if it were a higher and better life for us."[435] So, what limits human life—that we are mortal, have bodies that fail, need things from nature and one another—is also what allows, perhaps creates, that which is truly, intrinsically good, and these are things "different in kind from that which is good to and for a god."[436] It is for these reasons that Odysseus acted rightly in refusing Calypso.

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433. Nussbaum 1986, 2.

434. Nussbaum, 1993, 57.

435. Nussbaum 1990, 379.

436. Nussbaum, 1993, 58.

Bioethicist Leon Kass recently drew on the same understanding in portraying immortality as a state altogether alien from that of being human. Speaking at a conference to consider the implications of technological attempts to extend human life, Kass said that "to argue that human life is better without death is to argue human life would be better without being human." He recalled that Odysseus rejected Calypso's offer of being her immortal consort in favor of mortality and his human duty, that of continuing his hazardous voyage back to his home and his aged wife, Penelope. But Kass said he feared that public wisdom would not prevail against the temptation of immortality offered by the possibilities of cloning and other technologies: "While the head might counsel finitude, the blood likes to live."[437]

Neither Kass not anyone else means by these concerns that they fear there is a likelihood that human beings can achieve immortality, or even a dramatic extension of reasonable human lifespans. Neither are they approaching the issues as Luddites, opposed to technology generally. Rather, their intention is to encourage attendance to those aspects of human life that we most value. They suggest that instead of concentrating our efforts and resources on endeavors that may lead us away from what we value, and toward what has been referred to as a commodification of the species, we should pursue those projects that will fortify human control of technology rather than assume all innovation is progress and will proceed necessarily.

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437. Wade 2001, 1.

d. Hesiod. *Works and Days, Theogony*

Summary

*The Theogony and Works and Days* are among the earliest of the works in the Western tradition to provide a glimpse of life as new political and economic structures developed in the archaic period, roughly between 750–480. The only earlier material is the Homeric epics, which support much of what Hesiod says but Hesiod's *Works and Days* describes a local region of the Greek world that has changed since the one told about in the epics. He writes in the early seventh century as farmer and social critic, discussing "the social and economic institutions within which and in response to which these daily activities were undertaken."[438] *Works and Days* is written in the form of advice to his brother, Perses, giving him suggestions about farming and living a proper life. In his discussion he is thought to depend partly on the wisdom literature of the East[439] and to provide some insight into the rise of the individual in early Greece.[440] Except for some limited archaeological evidence, there is no way to verify Hesiod's accounts, but there is also no good reason to reject them. They are what we have, a story of what life was like in Ascra, a village just north of

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438. Tandy 1996, xiii.

439. West, Martin, ed. and comm. 1966. *Hesiod: Theogony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Also, West (1978) says Hesiod parallels literature from Hebrew, Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian, Persian, and Indian traditions as well as Medieval Irish, Middle English, Old French, Norse, Finnish, and others.

440. Polanyi 1977. Bernard Knox argues for a similar position when he finds in Hesiod an insistence by the author that his name be identified with the poems and that he expresses his personal opinions on moral and social problems. Knox believes that Hesiod's "solid presence" in his work suggests that he, unlike earlier singers, wanted to be identified with his work. If this is the case, we can profitably look at Hesiod as an early example of the developing individualistic trend in Western thought. This feature has implications for the issues of human/divine boundaries because as the individual becomes more dominant, communal norms relating to boundary issues are more likely to be challenged.

Athens in the early 700s. He writes just before the classical Greek civilization begins developing.

*Discussion*

Central to Hesiod's discussion is *dike* (pl. *dikai*), which refers to various forms of justice or, as in Homer, to the way things are, custom, or the way things go. Hugh Lloyd-Jones calls it the central concept of the early Greek religious outlook.[441] In his examination of *dike* starting with the Homeric epics and going to the end of the fifth century, Lloyd-Jones says it can refer to some kinds of "justice," but can also mean the divinely appointed order of the universe.[442] When Penelope in the *Odyssey* describes her husband Odysseus as onewho "did no act and spoke no word in his own country that was unfair . . . (nor was he) outrageous at all to any man,"[443] she contrasts him with godlike (or divine) kings, whose *dike* (custom) it is to often do wrong, as when "one will be hateful to a certain man, and favor another." This is just the way it is, she suggests, merely the custom of kings. In this sense, *dike* lacks the characteristic of moral praise culpability. The term occurs elsewhere as an idea that carries moral weight, and as the idea develops, *dike* takes on the connotation of the way things ought to be, or what is normal, expected, or right.

John Kerrigan says *dike* does not accurately translate by using "right" or any of the other terms in modern European vocabularies to define the sphere of

441. Lloyd-Jones 1971, ix.

442. Lloyd-Jones 1971, ix.

443. *Odyssey* 4.690–1.

just-dealing.[444] He says it has wide-ranging signifance in Athenian culture in reference to "order" or "vengeance" or "coherence" or "stability," in a variety of contexts from the political to the scientific. Where we might think of Orestes in *The Oresteia* as a "revenger," ancient Greek has no equivalent phrase, instead speaking of "the man who deals *dike*," or "he who restores honor or status or respect," or "the person who exacts a price, reciprocates, enforces an exchange."[445] Bernard Knox says the word can be understood in reference to its opposite, *hybris*, meaning, roughly, violence, but more commonly as "an overweening pride and sense of superiority, of invulnerability, of contempt for the rights of others."[446] Tandy says that in *Works and Days dike* has the primary meaning of "settlement, judgement," sometimes "penalty" and by extension the system within which disputes were settled. He says it is in Homer, but not in Hesiod that *dike* has moral force and refers to proper or just behavior. But Hesiod uses derivatives of *Dike*, such as *dikaios* and *adikos*, to refer to a moral force that can be translated as "just" and "unjust." In any case, keeping in mind Tandy's warning about the "fuzziness of our understanding of the range of meanings," [447] various forms of the word seem to refer to what is rightly deserved, or what is to be honored. Others have said that in the context of *Works and Days* the word is related to the way of nature or way of life of each natural thing. [448] In the *Odyssey*, good rulers uphold good *dike* (*eudikie*). [449] Similarly, in

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444. Kerrigan 1996, 20–21.

445. Kerrigan 1996, 21.

446. Knox 1996, 14.

447. Tandy 1996, 47.

448. Harrison 1912, 517.

*Works and Days*, Hesiod says those who "give straight *dikai* to outsiders and insiders" assist the polis to thrive and people to bloom.[450] But *dike* is also "just punishment," as when Zeus assigns *dike* to those "whose care is evil violence and cruel works"[451] as well as to an entire polis in which an evil man commits offenses: "On them the son of Cronus brings . . . hunger and plague together. The people die; women do not give birth . . . Cronus destroys their wide army, or their wall, or exacts atonement from their ships upon the open sea."[452]

The word is important to understanding issues of boundaries between the natural and supernatural and between what is properly within the human realm and what is rightly left to the divine. *Dike* is in this context understanding that there are boundaries related to acceptable, justifiable, right human action. Beginning with Homer, and continuing through Hesiod, the Greek tragedies, and into postmodern thought, *dike* is the delimiting concept that brings with it a sense of squeamishness, uncertainty, or even fear when we approach that boundary. It is what is meant when some say to science, "You are playing God, and your arrogance may have consequences." It is what Antigone meant when she tells Creon he is violating divine laws by refusing to allow Polyneices' burial. And it is what Creon refers to when he chastises Antigone.

The ancient corollary is in Hesiod when he compares those who act with proper *dike* to those who do not. He says in *Works and Days* that for those who give *dike*, who act with just action, "the city flourishes and the people in it. They

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449. *Odyssey* 19.108–114.

450. *WD* 225.

451. *WD* 238.

enjoy the blessings of peace . . . escape famine and they do the work that they must do as if it were a holiday. The earth gives them great livelihood, their oaks give acorns and honey, their flocks are heavy with wool, their women bear children who resemble the fathers." For those who fail to act with good *dike*, Zeus gives them punishment, which is also *dike*, and the punishment comes often as the result of the bad actions of one person: "Famine and plague, the deaths of the people, the barrenness of women, the destruction of the city's army, fleet and fortifications in war . . ."[453]

So here, as elsewhere, the boundary refers generally to transgressions against accepted morality or practice, as well as the just response to transgression. Adkins points out that some Greeks value justice "because and only because (or if and only if) the gods reward it"[454] and he points as an example to Hesiod: "Now may neither I nor my son be *dikaios* any more among men; for it is a bad thing, *kakon*, to be just if the unjust man is to come off better."[455] He finds additional support in Aeschylus's *Eumenides*: "Who that, in the 'light' of his heart, trembles at nothing, would continue to reverence *dike* in like manner [as in the past]?"[456] Adkins finds here evidence that the Furies "believe that men have in the past behaved justly out of fear, and that removal of the fear will remove reverence for justice." He says the position remains constant through the end of

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452. *WD* 243–247.

453. Knox 1996, 15.

454. Adkins 1975, 210.

455. *WD* 270ff. This is Adkins's translation. Tandy has: "Now indeed may I myself not be just among people, nor may my son, since it is an evil thing to be a just man, if the more unjust man will have greater *dike*."

456. *Eumenides* 517ff (Adkins translation).

the play. There is no evidence that the "relation of divine punishment (or fear of it) to the choiceworthiness of justice has in any way changed."[457] As always, there is dissent. Creed objects:

> It is no doubt true that a motive for the avoidance of injustice was often the fear of divine retribution, but to infer from this that it was the only reason why justice was valued begs the question. Rather an appreciation of the value of justice might lead to the view that the gods reward it."[458]

The issue of whether *dike* is required because it brings reward from the gods or because that is what a person should do arises in Adkins's *Merit and Responsibility*[459] and again of course in Plato's *Meno* and *Crito*.

Hesiod refers to Prometheus in *Works and Days,* but provides a richer description in *Theogony*. In modern interpretations, Prometheus's theft of fire from the gods is thought to be a metaphor for gaining forbidden knowledge. It is a story very much like the eating of forbidden fruit by Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden.[460] Hesiod's account uses Prometheus to explain why the gods have hidden the good life from humans.[461] In Hesiod's *Works and Days,* and *Theogony,* Prometheus[462] sought to deceive Zeus by tricking him into choosing the inferior of two plates offered for dinner. In *Theogony* he says Prometheus

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457. Adkins 1975, 210. A more extensive discussion of this issue is in my discussion of the *Iliad,* below, III.*b*.

458. Creed 1973, 217, note 4.

459. *Crito* 45c5ff and elsewhere. *Meno* 77b4ff and elsewhere.

460. Genesis 3.

461. Again, whereas there are similarities to the eating of the forbidden fruit by Adam and Even, because as punishment, God condemned humanity to painstaking labor, misery in childbirth, and banished them to live in hardship outside the garden (Genesis 3.17ff).

462. *WD* 48ff.

divided a sacrificial animal's meat in a way that Zeus got only bones under a layer of fat and humans got the meat.[463] Zeus in response "contrived pernicious woes for people," including hiding fire from them. But Prometheus refused to honor Zeus's proscription and stole the fire, then hid it in a hollow fennel stalk, and gave it to human beings. [464]

Zeus was so enraged, he punished Prometheus for giving humans the "far-seen glory of fire" by driving : "a stanchion through his middle. Also he let loose on him the wing-spread eagle, and it was feeding on his imperishable liver, which by night would grow back to size from what the spread-winged bird had eaten in the daytime."[465]

The combination of Prometheus's two transgressions, deceit and theft, gave Zeus the excuse he had been looking for to punish the human race. The punishment was devastating and has since been the archetypal reward for crossing a line set by the gods. Hesiod relates that Pandora and her box were created by Zeus especially for the task.[466] She was made so that she would tempt Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus. Charmed by her, Epimetheus allowed her to be let loose upon the world[467] to scatter "pernicious woes," filling the earth and the sea with evils of disease, mortality, and hard toil: "There are diseases for

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463. *Theogony* 535–64.

464. *Theogony* 565–69.

465. *Theogony* 521ff.

466. In *Theogony,* Hesiod does not give her a name, apparently thinking it suffices to call her "an evil thing." At *WD* 80, he says she was Pandora.

467. A similar rendition of the troubles besetting humanity having their source in woman is found in Christian interpretations of the story of Eve enticing Adam to eat from the forbidden fruit. For a discussion of this, see Knox 1996, 9ff.

people during the day, and others in the night that wander under their own power, bringing evils to mortals secretly because Zeus the Planner took out their voice."[468]

Hesiod says the new creation was a "beautiful evil thing" from which "originates the breed of female women" who live with mortal men, "and are a great sorrow to them" because "hateful poverty they will not share, but only luxury." On Hesiod's account, Zeus created women solely to be a pernicious trial for men, "accomplished in bringing hard labors . . . (and) sorrowful things . . ."[469]

In *WD*, Hesiod fills out the story a bit. We learn more about the time when humanity lived a life of ease. Before Pandora and her box of woes, for example, men were "free from all evils, free from laborious work, and free from all wearing sicknesses that bring their fates down on men. "[470] For men, there is to be no abatement from the evil of women and all the suffering they brought into the world. But Prometheus does gets relief. Zeus's son, Heracles, arrives and kills the eagle, partly because Zeus's anger has subsided and partly because he wants Heracles to achieve greater fame. Prometheus is left attached to the rock, but his liver is no longer being eaten anew each day.

Prometheus learned the seriousness of the proscription against enabling human intrusion in divine territory by being chained to a rock and having his liver ripped out every day for giving humans fire. The fire was meant to stay in

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468. *WD* 80ff. Some of the variations on the Prometheus legend are discussed below in section III.*d* on Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. That section also includes discussion of differences between the accounts of Aeschylus and Hesiod.

469. *Theogony* 585–604.

470. *WD* 90–95.

the divine world, a secret only gods should share.[471] There are variations on the story of Prometheus—the nature of his transgression, the justification for his punishment, and exactly what that was—but they have in common that he violated the boundary between gods and humanity. Humanity must live with the punishment even though, at least on Hesiod's account, we did nothing to deserve it. The implication is that intentionally or not, when human beings violate limits, a bag of troubles await.

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e. Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*

*Summary*

*The Oresteia,* comprised of *Agamemnon, Libation Bearers,* and *Eumenides,* is the only complete trilogy in Greek drama that we have. A story of struggle and regeneration, it is the record of a family and of the passage from the values of an ancient warrior aristocracy to communal institutions of justice. The entire story is set against the background of the founder of the House of Atreus, Tantalus, who violated the bounds of civility by serving his son's flesh to the gods. They responded by bringing the boy Pelops back to life and sending his father to Hades. Pelops had two sons, Atreus and Thyestes. Thyestes seduced his brother's wife and tried to ascend to Atreus's throne. To avenge the crimes, Atreus invited Thyestes to a banquet, kidnapped his children, killed them, and served their chopped-up bodies to their father as the main course. Thyestes wreaked his own

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471. Gantz 1993, 155 ff.

vengeance by invoking a curse on Atreus, his family, and all their descendents. He then entered a miserable exile with his one remaining son, Aegisthus.

Atreus had two sons, Agamemnon, who married Clytaemnestra, and Menelaus, who married Helen. When Helen was seduced and carried away by Paris of Troy, Agamemnon led the Greek armada that laid siege to Troy. As Agamemnon's forces sailed toward Troy, their ships were stilled by winds quieted by the gods. Agamemnon learned from a god that winds would rise again only if Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia. The Greek commander agreed, the winds rose, and the ships sailed on to Troy. *The Oresteia* begins nine years later, after the Greeks sacked Troy and Agamemnon took as a spoil of war Cassandra, the daughter of Trojan king Priam and priestess of Apollo.

In the *Agamemnon,* Clytaemnestra kills her husband when he returns home from the war, angrily accusing him of having acquiesced in the brutal sacrifice of their daughter Iphigeneia and then improperly bringing Cassandra home to share their marriage bed. Clytaemnestra then rules over Argos with her lover Aegisthus, Thyestes' son. In *Libation Bearers* Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, is commanded by Apollo to avenge his father's death. Orestes dutifully slays his mother and her lover but is haunted by his pollution and by his mother's Furies, or Erinyes, who follow him everywhere, driving him mad. In *Eumenides* the Furies chase him to Apollo's shrine at Delphi. Orestes' bloodguilt is released by the god, but the Furies still plague him. Orestes is told that Athena might be able to help assuage his torment. In Athens, the goddess establishes the law court of the Areopagus, where Orestes is tried, acquitted, and told to return to Argos to rule. The story ends when Athena

negotiates the transformation of the Furies, who represent revenge, into the benevolent Eumenides, the kindly ones. They become a symbol that a new civic system of justice and order has begun. It marks a future in which there is the promise that rational discussion, not vengeful brutality, will determine appropriate punishment in Athens.

*Discussion*

Aeschylus wrote of suffering and its significance. He suggests that if the Areopagus can come from Orestes' killing his mother, if inherited curses can lead to transformation of the Furies, then pain can transcend its suffering, and the pathology of cyclical revenge can transform what E. R. Dodds said was a culture ridden by its guilt[472] into the foundation for democratic community.[473] The story expresses hope for moral progress. At the same time, it offers a thoroughgoing ambiguity about whether the human drive for progress and change has limits imposed by either nature or divinity. What limits it suggests seem established by humanity's fears. This is perhaps because Aeschylus writes at a time marked by enormous social and political turbulence as well as the tentative stirrings of an

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472. Dodds 1951, 28ff.

473. This is what Williams in *Shame and Necessity* (pages 5ff) describes as an element of the "progressivist" account of moral progress in the ancient world. Williams, without endorsing it, frames the account as: Greeks had primitive ideas of action, responsibility, ethical motivation, and justice, which in the course of history have been replaced by a more complex and refined set of conceptions that define a more mature form of ethical experience. Further, the world of Homer is thought to have embodied a shame culture (See Dodds 1951 for details), and that shame was later replaced, in its crucial ethical role, by guilt. Some think that this process had gone a long way by the time of Plato or even the tragedians. Others see all Greek culture as governed by notions that are nearer to shame than to a full notion of moral guilt, with its implications of freedom and autonomy; they believe that moral guilt was attained only by the modern consciousness. Dodds held the former view; the latter is dominant in Adkins. Lloyd-Jones (1971) warns that little can be educed about any of this.

individualism that could tend to believe boundaries were limited only by imagination.

On the face of it, *The Oresteia* seems to be an account of people who often and brutally overreach proper limits. Agamemnon kills his daughter to enable the Greek forces to attack Troy and revenge the seduction of his brother's wife. Clytaemnestra hacks her husband to death for killing their daughter. Agamemnon accedes to the sacrifice because, like Creon in the *Antigone,* he believes his primary obligation is to the polis rather than to his family. Aegisthus takes up wrongful residence in the queen's bed while her husband is at war. The murderous rage that Clytemnestra exhibits has uncertain provenance: Is the presence of Cassandra and the death of her daughter a convenient excuse to replace Agamemnon with Aegisthus? Orestes exacts blood revenge that in other circumstances might seem appropriate payment for his father's murder. But here, with his sword ripping open his own mother's body, it seems to be a rude violation of laws more fundamental than the necessity of revenge. Orestes is haunted by the terror of his act because he believes it violates the rules of proper behavior as surely as did Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia violate the rules of family bonds.

When Orestes acts to avenge his father's death, the key concept in understanding his motivation in the context of ancient Greek culture is *dike.* But John Kerrigan points to the difficulty of the term when he says there is nothing in modern European vocabularies that encompass dike. The Greek had no term for a "revenger." Instead, they had the concept of "the man who deals dike," or "he

who restores honor or status or respect," who "enforces an exchange."[474] The difficulty of exactly translating dike means that *The Oresteia,* like other tragedies that use the same term, means that the meaning and significance of the action and language of the story is always open to argument. Kerrigan says about this that when a work "is written around complex keywords . . . their semantic intricacy provides fuel for debate," which is the source of much of the power of *The Oresteia* to speak to modern concerns.[475]

The tale's continuing power rests also in that Aeschylus does more, here and elsewhere, than point to the overreaching of humanity and the ensuing suffering. His stories are hymns to humanity's ability to endure suffering, to transcend the blood curse of hereditary guilt and ethical conflict. The, as Robert Fagles describes it, is humanity's "battle for freedom in the teeth of fate, and his collaboration with his gods to create a better world."[476] Zeus, as the old men of Argos explain, "lays it down as law that we must suffer, suffer into truth." Aeschylus is clear that if suffering has meanings, its significance must lie in its capacity to transform. It is the transformation of suffering into truth.

*The Oresteia* continues to speak to audiences today because it celebrates humanity's courage to explore new possibilities and create new versions of itself, and yet it warns that this courage carries with it the likelihood of misbehavior and anguish. The paradox suggests that a tension is necessary between progress and suffering and that people must accept both the danger and the exhilaration

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474. Kerrigan 1996, 20–21.

475. Kerrigan 1996, 21.

476. Fagles 1975, 6.

of the directions our nature leads. The house of Atreus is enveloped in fear, danger, guilt, misery, and memory. Like the House of Laius, the pollution forces each of its members to recreate the crimes and the guilt of their ancestors—a cycle of foreboding evil that Aeschylus argues can be broken.

E. R. Dodds says the kind of mythology that creates the houses of Atreus, of Laius, and of kindred circles, reflects the pathology of a culture ridden by guilt.[477] The guilt rises from a world where violence begets more violence, which in turn begets historical upheavals, economic crises, and class warfare.[478] During the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries, the upheavals affected social systems and familial bonds, and for explanation people attributed cause to an angry set of incomprehensible gods who established fate and issued tragic judgments. Dodds believes the Greeks sought escape, sometimes in the Apollonian demand for self restraint and sometimes in the ecstatic release of Dionysian frenzy.[479]

Fagles says that Aeschylus's interest in Dionysus lies in the cult's development from one that included rites of ripping apart living beings and eating their flesh into an established religion with tamer ritual practices, thus suggesting the capacity of humanity for renewal and redirection.[480] The story of the House of Atreus is the story of a rite of passage, of moving from suffering to regeneration, from unknowing to knowing, and the strides along the way that are necessary to the eventual result. In this way, Fagles sees each book in *The*

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477. Dodds 1951, chapter 2; also related discussion, 244ff.

478. Discussion of class warfare and related issues is in Ste. Croix 1981. Also see Crook 1983. Additional discussion of Ste. Croix's thesis and related issues is in T.D. Barnes 1982, K. R. Bradley 1982, Robert Browning 1983.

479. Dodds 1951, 76ff

*Oresteia* as rites of passage along the way from savagery to civilization. He says the *Agamemnon* is the rite of separation as the king is cut off from his society. *Libation Bearers* is the rite of transition, depicting the son at the threshold of maturity. *Eumenides* is the rite of aggregation that "celebrates Orestes' initiation into Argos and our initiation into Athens."[481]

While *The Oresteia* seems to depict regeneration coming from suffering, it is also a dramatic account of efforts to resolve questions of justice and the appropriate bounds for human striving. It tells of the trials that result from human social missteps, and perhaps similar to the events of the *Bacchae*, the capacity to evolve higher states of consciousness.

As the Greeks struggled with changes in their economic and civic systems during the late archaic period, we struggle in the postmodern era to emerge from the uncertainties of modernity. Our questioning of the gods, of natural orders, and of humanity's proper domain, contains differences in the details but our questioning is of like kind to those the Greeks asked: How do we see ourselves in relationship to each other and to the gods? Is it always true that, as the chorus says, the gods have ordered that we must suffer to find wisdom?[482] What does it mean to extend justice? What is the best kind of community? How do we want to be different than we are? What are the questions we should be asking? What is in our domain and what is not?

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480. Fagles 1975, 7–8.

481. Fagles 1975, 9.

482. *Agamemnon* 176: "Zeus has led us on to know, the Helmsman lays it down as law that we must suffer, suffer into truth."

These questions are implicit in *OT*, and are spoken to directly when Oedipus explains that whereas Apollo made his pains much worse, "the hand that struck my eyes was mine and mine alone." Fate and blood curses had a hand in his suffering, but Oedipus came to understand that he alone chose how he would respond to what was fated. Compare this to Agamemnon in the *Iliad* explaining what caused him to take Cassandra from Achilleus: "not I was the cause of this act, but Zeus and my portion and the Erinys who walks in darkness: they it was who in the assembly put wild *ate*[483] in my understanding, on that day when I arbitrarily took Achilleus' prize from him. So what could I do? Deity will always have its way."[484]

This may seem to be an evasion of responsibility and hence another failure to see that will lead to Agamemnon's punishment. But Dodds argues that Agamemnon is not trying to evade responsibility; instead he is expressing a form of early Greek justice, which cares not at all about intent, only about the act. Thus Agamemnon offers just compensation to Achilleus because the reason he took

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483. Lloyd-Jones in *Justice* (1971) defines *ate* as "a temporary insanity, causing disastrous error, often sent by Zeus to mortals." Dodds (1951), 3ff, interprets the Greek *ate* as the experience of divine temptation or infatuation. He says it was a claim often made when one needs an explanation for doing something that causes the contempt or ridicule of his fellows. Loss of self-control, or disregard of proper behavior, or a failure to act rightly in various ways is thus explained as the result of *ate*. Dodds points out that if Agamemnon had acted of his own volition, he could not so easily admit himself in the wrong. Early Greek justice cared nothing for intent; it was solely the act that mattered. Dodds says it was after the Homeric age that *ate* was transformed into a punishment and the Erinyes became ministers of vengeance, and Zeus an embodiment of cosmic justice. Although *ate* occurs in the *Iliad* 9.505ff and 19.91ff. in personal terms as punishment, Dodds says these are meant as allegory (Dodds1951, 18 and 37ff.) Generally, Dodds says, *ate* bears the connotation of a ruin that is supernaturally determined, but that in Homer it is often merely a state of mind, a temporary clouding or bewildering of the normal consciousness. On this, see Dodds 5 and 38ff. At 5, Dodds declares that the assertion of Liddell and Scott that *ate* is "mostly sent as the punishment of guilty rashness" is quite untrue of Homer. In Hesiod's *WD*, at 214ff, *ate* is the inescapable penalty for *hubris*, although *ate* is translated by Lattimore as "delusions" and by Tandy as "calamities."

484. *Iliad* 19.86ff.

Cassandra is not important, only that he took her: "since I was blinded by *ate* and Zeus took away my understanding, I am willing to make my peace and give abundant compensation."[485] Achilleus shares this understanding of causation: "Father Zeus, great indeed are the *atai* thou givest to men. Else the son of Atreus would never have persisted in rousing the *thumos* in my chest, nor obstinately taken the girl against my will."[486] The moral value of intention in assigning culpability would develop later. For Homer, perhaps on Dodds's account for Aeschylus too, it may not have been as significant. Instead, these passages and the action surrounding them point to the questions I suggested above about justice, community, our view of ourselves, and the limits of our domain.

*Dike*, in *OC* and *OT*, as in Aeschylus's *Prometheus* and in Agamemnon's explanation for taking Cassandra, is the central issue. It is held out during the Homeric and Aeschylean periods as the promise of right behavior and orderly relations, but instead, following Fagles, *dike* "has remained a force of vengeance, cursing offenders and their heirs with endless acts of violence—the punishment of the Furies."[487] In this way, *ate* is the explanation both for the causes of offense and pollution, as well as for the reaction to it.[488] When Paris seduces Helen, he violates *dike*. But the Greeks' reaction is polluted from the beginning by Agamemnon's violation of familial *dike* in sacrificing his daughter. One impropriety leads to another, and so the lingering brutalities begin feeding on themselves. The battle in *The Oresteia* centers on whether the family can find

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485. *Iliad* 137ff

486. *Iliad* 19.270ff.

487. Fagles 1975, 11.

488. See discussion of *ate* in note 408 above.

resolution, can find new ways of honoring *dike* in a culture undergoing elemental changes. The cultural changes created new dilemmas in religious, social, and familial relationships that call for new ways of thinking, especially about the proper extending of *dike*. Aeschylus forces us to see that it is not just his generation that faces this question. Rather, each new generation faces both opportunity and danger and it is in the way it deals with *dike* in the changed culture of the new generation that determines whether we get mired in the same stupidities or we find new understandings that afford the possibility of moral progress.

Fagles says *The Oresteia* presents a range of conflicts: theological conflict between will and necessity, or between Zeus and the Fates, or the gods of the sky and the powers of the earth; social conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy; psychological conflict between our intellect and "our hunger for release, our darker, vengeful drives that can invigorate our dreams of ideality, equity and balance."[489] It is in the way the conflicts come to be seen as working together rather than in opposition that, for Aeschylus, resolution becomes possible. The boundaries between the two sides in the conflicts remain, but their relationship becomes synergistic, which allows *dike* as retribution to be transformed into *dike* as justice. This process is most apparent in the Furies, which transform from being the spirits of the avenging dead into the spirits of civic justice.

As the force that impels the community toward its future, the Furies are Promethean, bringing to humanity the possibility of a new order of justice rising out of the old order of vengeance. The idea that conflicting positions like

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489. Fagles 1975, 12.

vengeance and justice can work synergistically, transformatively, also may be seen in the conflict between will and necessity. Dodds asserts that for the Greeks, will and necessity do not refer to the same issues as they are framed in the modern debate between freedom and determinism: "To ask whether Homer's people are determinists or libertarians is a fantastic anachronism: the question has never occurred to them, and if it were put to them it would be very difficult to make them understand what it meant."[490] They differentiate between normal actions and actions done under the influence of *ate* or of fate. On this account, the immediate agent of Agamemnon's death is Clytemnestra, but it might also be indirectly attributed to the Erinys as the agents of *ate* and vengeance, or to fate as the overall context. Dodds says all three exist in Agamemnon's understanding of causation, and so culpability is held on several levels, all of which work together.

Culpability is significant in Aeschylus because it demarcates the locations at which human responsibility begins and ends. If man is the measure of all things, then *ate* and fate and the will of the gods are all held within humanity's imagination and control. Dodds finds a deep sense of human insecurity and helplessness in the fragmentary literature of the Archaic Age, as well as in Pindar and Sophocles and, generally, in Herodotus, all of whom have a mostly archaic outlook. The insecurity accrues, on Dodds' account, partly from the sense of deity holding human beings down, being "jealous and interfering," as Herodotus puts it.[491] We wonder how overmastering gods can be so jealous of an insignificant

490. Dodds 1951, 7.

491. Herodotus 1.32.

humanity, why they resent our successes and happiness. The explanation is usually that the immortals do not want humans to begin encroaching on their prerogatives, their domain.[492] The gods alone get the contents of the jar that carries the unmixed good. Human beings get either unmixed evil or a mixed assortment of the contents.[493] In *Agamemnon* Aeschylus speaks about divine jealousy as "a venerable doctrine uttered long ago."[494] Too much success can bring on jealousy, and bragging about it is almost certain to. Prometheus learned this anew each time his liver was chewed out of his body. Insecurity and anxiety also resulted from the political and economic turmoil of the seventh and sixth centuries, which brought an upheaval in the social strata. The insecurities showed up in various ways, among them development of a belief in demons, "based on the sense of man's helpless dependence upon capricious Power."[495]

A significant result of these changes was a shift in the stability of the family, and thus a shift in the proper boundaries of behavior within and in relationship to the family. The family was the keystone of the archaic social structure, Dodds says, "the first organised unit, the first domain of law" and the father was king of his household.[496] The father had authority to expose his children in infancy and to expel them from the community when they were older. A son had duties to his father, but no rights. And Greeks viewed offenses against the father as second only to impiety against the gods. As claims to individual

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492. Dodds 1951, 29.

493. *Iliad* 24. This is also discussed above in section III.b, the *Iliad*.

494. *Agamemnon* 750.

495. Dodds 1951, 45.

personal rights and responsibilities rose, family bonds relaxed. During the Classical period, the sophistic movement marked a further deterioration: "the conflict became in many households a fully conscious one: young men began to claim that they had a "natural right" to disobey their father. But it is a fair guess that such conflicts already existed at the unconscious level from a very much earlier date—that in fact they go back to the earliest unconfessed stirrings of individualism in a society where family solidarity was still universally taken for granted."[497]

This account of a culture in change suggests that in Aeschylus, Agamemnon and the old order of *dike* had to die to allow the possibility of a new order. As in *Prometheus*, the bringer of fire had to be punished to satisfy the gods and allow humanity to progress. Agamemnon's guilt in violating familial *dike* is clear in the choice he made between war and daughter. It is less clear that Aeschylus wanted Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia to justify Clytemnestra's murder of her husband. He is doing more than suggesting her revenge results from a curse operating on the house, from Agamemnon's paying for the sins of his fathers. Aeschylus 's portrayal of a family dissolving so that it can regenerate becomes the claim that any system—social, political, familial, religious—must be able to rethink its most basic traditions, continue them when they allow the system to thrive, and remake them when they cause the system to wither. So Clytemnestra's killing of Agamemnon and Orestes' slaying of Clytemnestra is also comparable to the complete disintegration of the old order. In *Hecuba*,

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496. Dodds 1951, 45. Aristotle, too, describes the father's position as analogous to that of a king, *Politics* 1.2, 1252b 20

497. Dodds 1951, 47.

Hecuba appeals to *nomos*, moral law, which she describes as superior even to the gods: ". . . the gods are strong, and strong is the great Law that governs them. It is by Law that we believe the gods exist; By Law we live, by Law distinguish right and wrong."[498] She draws on *nomos* to persuade Agamemnon to help her take vengeance on her son's murderers.[499] Agamemnon refuses to help her, but does not deny that vengeance, as well as helping her as a friend, is what *nomos* prescribes. He says the issue is more complicated than the simple application of *nomos*, however, and, while he would like to help, he must step carefully where there is uncertainty.[500] Nussbaum says the morality of helping friends that was pervasive in ancient Greece was under attack by the time of Sophocles and that even Aeschylus is critical of the morality of revenge. She, like Dodds, argues that *The Oresteia* depicts social morality arising out of the containment of revenge.[501] When Sophocles followed Aeschylus to the Athenian stage, he would be what Dodds says is the last great exponent of the archaic world view. Sophocles expressed the "full tragic significance of the old religious themes in their unsoftened, unmoralised forms—the overwhelming sense of human helplessness in face of the divine mystery, and of the *ate*[502] that waits on all human achievement—and who made these thoughts part of the cultural inheritance of Western man."[503]

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498. *Hecuba* 797–800.

499. *Hecuba* 734ff, 786ff.

500. *Hecuba* 850–862.

501. Nussbaum 1993, 67. Also see Blundell 1989, 6ff.

502. For *ate*, see note 408 above.

503. Dodds 1951, 49.

*f. Aeschylus. Prometheus Bound and Prometheus Unbound*

*Summary*

*Prometheus Bound* is thought to have been the first in an early fifth-century trilogy dramatizing the fiercely violent argument between Zeus and Prometheus. Another play in the Prometheus trilogy, *Prometheus Unbound,* survives only in fragments. A third Aeschylean play about Prometheus, *Prometheus Firestarter,* is also known only from fragmentary evidence. It is thought to have been a satyr play that apparently burlesqued Prometheus's giving fire to human beings and it may have accompanied a different trilogy.[504] The tales are especially relevant to this dissertation because they contain clearly discussed boundaries set by divinities and because some of the themes parallel similar ideas related in the Genesis creation story.

Together, the stories consider the nature of gods, their relationship with each other, and how some of this affects humanity. Prometheus, whose name means "the forethinker," betrayed his fellow Titans by siding with Zeus and the Olympians in the war between the two groups of divinities—Olympians and Titans. His relationship with Zeus soured when Prometheus altered the status of humans by giving them fire, providing for them the ability to develop the arts and crafts—technology.

The play begins with Prometheus as a prisoner of Zeus's representatives, Power and Force. At their instruction, Prometheus is staked to a rock by Hephaestus and left as punishment for violating Zeus's will in assisting humans.

504. Gantz 1993, 158.

He asks that the elements witness his suffering and much of the rest of the play is Prometheus explaining to the chorus and a series of visitors—Ocean, Io, and Hermes—that he is being punished for giving humanity fire, along with the blind hopes that veil knowledge of death.[505] Prometheus also tells a secret, which turns out to be one of the central issues of the play: that Zeus, unless warned in time, will some day father a son fated to be greater than Zeus. This sets up a battle between Zeus, who has seemingly all power in the universe, and Prometheus, who has knowledge of an event that can end Zeus's rule.

A second central element of the story is Io's visit to Prometheus. She tells him of the miseries she has suffered as a result of Zeus's lust unsatisfied lust for her. His wife Hera's jealous anger forced her to wander the earth, plagued by the droning and biting horsefly that accompanies her wherever she goes. Her story is an account of the gods' oppression of humanity. When Io's father sought her freedom from Zeus and his wife, his messengers were told by Apollo's oracle that she must wander the earth, untouchable, and if she is not driven out of her home Zeus would destroy humanity with a thunderbolt. In his meeting with Io, Prometheus tells her that for several generations she will continue to wander through the universe, facing various troubles, and that one of her descendants will eventually set Prometheus free.

The bitter tale Io tells leads Prometheus to reveal to Io and the chorus the story of Zeus's future son, and this revalation in turn causes a furious confrontation between Prometheus and Zeus. When Prometheus challenges Zeus

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505. In Hesiod, the punishment is said to be punishment for Prometheus's tricking Zeus into taking a plate of bones and fat instead of a plate of meat.

for his stubborn arrogance, especially in his treament of humanity, Hermes is sent from the heavens to threaten Prometheus with more violence if he does not reveal the name of the woman fated to bear Zeus's son. Prometheus refuses, and the play ends when Zeus angrily raises a cosmic convulsion to hurl Prometheus into the abyss of Tartarus.

Aeschylus does not mention Pandora, the misery brought by women, or Prometheus's deception of Zeus in tricking him out of getting the best portion of meat. Aeschylus also differs from Hesiod in saying that Prometheus provided humanity not just with fire but also with architecture, advanced methods of agriculture, domestication of animals, divination, and writing. Prometheus in the Aeschylean version is said to have prevented Zeus from entirely destroying humanity:

> . . . to the unhappy
> breed of mankind he gave no heed, intending
> to blot the race out and create a new.
> Against these plans none stood save I: I dared.
> I rescued men from shattering destruction
> that would have carried them to Hades' house;
> and therefore I am tortured on this rock . . .[506]

In what is known from surviving fragments of *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus—after a time in Tartarus—is returned to earth, bound again, and, as in Hesiod, his liver repeatedly torn out by Zeus's eagle. The story ends when Heracles shoots the eagle and releases Prometheus. This differs from Hesiod's version that says nothing about Prometheus being released.

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506. *Prometheus Bound* 232–245.

Some answers to questions raised by the various stories are not included in the extant plays. It might be that it is in the missing parts we would learn why Zeus wanted to eliminate the human race and why Prometheus first turned against Zeus and tricked him with the ruse of meat and bones. We might also learn why Zeus eventually allowed Prometheus's release. Some readings of other fragmentary evidence argue that Zeus eventually learned from Prometheus that the son who could overthrow his rule was to be born to Thetis.[507] But like all stories about Greek gods, the versions told vary considerably depending upon who was telling and when it was told.

*Discussion*

In *Prometheus Bound,* Zeus is depicted as cruel, tyrannical, ungrateful, and would destroy humanity if it were not for the intervention of Prometheus. Prometheus is defiantly determined to undermine Zeus's power, save humanity, and revenge Io's suffering. This is an unusual view of Zeus. Scholars commenting on the play routinely note that the Zeus of *Prometheus Unbound* is very different than the Zeus of Aeschylus's other plays.[508] In the *Suppliants,* for example, Zeus is humanity's protector, a wise judge of good and evil who rules justly.[509] In Homer, Zeus generally possesses three of the functions later closely associated with that of protecting justice: he is protector of oaths, of strangers, of the law of host and

507. See, for example, Hall 1997, 90.

508. See, for example, Balot 2001, on Zeus in Homer and Hesiod as protector of fair-minded men and of justice, 60–61, 73, 85–86, and Golden 1962, 100ff.

509. *Suppliants* 437, 78, 343, 395, and elsewhere.

guests, and of suppliants.[510] Lloyd-Jones explains the differences among the various accounts by arguing that Zeus throughout Greek literature is arbitrary and inconsistent, that "the gods by their laws encourage righteousness among men. But they themselves are not obliged to obey those laws, nor should we be reasonable to expect it. . ."[511]

It may be that the Zeus of the *Suppliants* is the god who represents the controlled behavior of justice, while the Zeus of *Prometheus Bound* represents the uncontrolled, mysterious powers of the universe, and that the combination represents in Aeschylus, as in us, the tension of uncertainty regarding power and authority in the universe.[512] William Zak suggests this in arguing that this story, along with others such as *Oedipus*, demonstrates that nothing, including Prometheus, can mediate between humanity and the gods with much success.[513] Whether they got fire on their own or as a gift from a god, humanity would still have to suffer for violating the divine boundary.

Human beings, Zak says, thus must act even amidst the uncertainties of the terrors that exist in the universe. Prometheus and his brother, Epimetheus, might be divine benefactors to humanity, but they cannot—except in rare and unexplainable circumstances—protect against the mysterious and uncontrollable incertitude of chance, fate, and the gods. Bernard Williams speaks to this in asserting that humanity rightly employs a "Promethean fear" of taking too

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510. Lloyd-Jones 1971, 5.

511. Lloyd-Jones 1956, 66.

512. See Podlecki 1999 for a discussion of the Greek political background and the analogies of Zeus in *Prometheus Bound* to contemporary leaders.

513. Zak 1995, 189.

"lightly or inconsiderately our relations with nature."[514] This fear, he says, is something that is not simply an archaic remnant that we can ignore:

> . . . Promethean fear is a good general warning device, reminding us still appropriately of what we may properly fear. But apart from that, if it is something that many people deeply feel, then it is something that is likely to be pervasively connected to things that we value, to what gives life the kinds of significance that it has. We should not suppose that we know how this may be, or that we can be sure that we can do without those things.[515]

Williams says nature offers an example of how this fear provides guidance and caution in exercising the traditional doctrine of our "transcendence of nature, and with it our monarchy of the earth." In this way, nature provides a boundary to our activities, "defining certain interventions and certain uncontrolled effects as transgressive."[516]

For many, this conception of boundary and transgression, is a part of a religious sensibility. As such, human beings should understand that there are limits. In *Prometheus Bound,* Zeus and the uncontrollability of the gods represent a counterpoint to the outlook of some religions that claim human domination of the world.

This uncontrollability often shows up in tragedy as the expression of *pathos,* the suffering that comes from seemingly undeserved punishment.[517] Thomas Gould says *Prometheus Bound* is the most sustained spectacle of *pathos* in

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514. Williams 1995, 239.

515. Williams 1995, 239.

516. Williams 1995, 237—38.

517. See the discussion of *pathos* above, section II.c.

surviving Greek drama.[518] Its portrayal of Prometheus as a longsuffering benefactor of humanity, shackled to a bleak mountaintop, is the archetype of suffering that is not justified by the crime. And it does not end with the first play; it continues in *Prometheus Unbound* when in what may be the opening scene, his visitors say: "we have come, Prometheus . . . to gaze upon this *pathos*, your bondage."[519] It is in this second play that Prometheus is left staked to the wall accompanied by Zeus's eagle, who repeatedly eats Prometheus's perpetually regenerating liver.[520]

Gould says that in the third play of the trilogy,[521] for which only fragments survive, a cosmic equilibrium between Prometheus and Zeus is achieved. Nothing, throughout the available fragments suggests that Prometheus deserved his punishment, or, Gould says, that Zeus can be "exonerated of the charge of having persecuted the good. It is the gods, not their victims, who must be transformed."[522]

The story's themes are early examples of recurrent motifs in Western literature and thought:

1. Intelligence against force: Prometheus stiffly refuses to reveal a secret to Zeus and Zeus tries to destroy Prometheus's will by nailing him to a fissure in the

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518. Gould 1990, 126–27.

519. Gould 1990, 127.

520. For a discussion about ways tragic authors such as Aeschylus use tragic elements, including pathos, to involve and instruct the audience, see P. E. Easterling 1996.

521. There is enormous scholarly uncertainty over the ordering of the plays in the Prometheus trilogy, as well as what is contained in the two plays that survive only as fragments. Whether Aeschylus or someone else wrote *Prometheus Bound* is also questioned. For a discussion of the controversies, see D. J. Conacher 1980, 141–74.

mountains at the end of the world and then splitting the earth, leaving Prometheus buried beneath it for eons.

2. Humanity against god: Zeus seeks to assert his authority by keeping humanity in a subservient position, powerless without fire and the arts, while a rebel divinity assists their independence.

E.A. Havelock says *Prometheus Bound* reflects "a deep distrust of man's own powers of purpose and contrivance, and especially of his intelligence, which if exercised can collide with the mind of god and invite jealousy and so disaster. The fruit of the tree of knowledge must not be eaten."[523] The tale is more than a caution against knowledge, however; it exhibits what Havelock says is the hallmark of Greek tragic humanism: "There is the distrust of what man can do, and the reluctance to match him against his environment. Yet this is balanced by a feeling that man is heir of the gods, with whom he once kept company and against whom he once competed; that he has to fool them, and can fool them, . . ."[524]

This balance between the power of divinity and the nature of humanity plays out, in the way Aeschylus tells it in *Prometheus Unbound*,[525] when Zeus has the hero impaled on a pillar and tortured by an eagle, and then released by Heracles, an action suggesting Zeus's emasculation by humanity's reach for knowledge. The power of Zeus is diminished, but the Olympic pantheon is not

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522. Gould 1990, 127.

523. Havelock 1950, 51.

524. Havelock 1950, 51.

being overthrown. Zeus and the others remain, on Aeschylus's account, but humanity is raised up as an antagonist equal to the gods. They still have not tasted of immortality, which could make their knowledge more powerful and godlike. The battle depicts Zeus enraged, willing to destroy all so that he can punish Prometheus and retain supremacy. Havelock reads this as a radical correction in Greek tradition: to convert Zeus from "the architect of an ordered cosmos into a chaotic and willful force which would pull the cosmos about Prometheus's ears. This cannot but be intended to strip Zeus of dignity. It reduces him to a status below that of the Forethinker."[526] As the end of the play approaches, Prometheus proclaims proudly,

> Doom waits for Jove. His proud and violent heart shall verily stoop . . . Let him now in face of this sit cheerful in the sky trusting loud noise and waving thunderbolts . . . These cannot fend away his coming fall and scanda dire and unendurable. . . . Colliding with disaster, Jove shall see what bondage means for one who has been free. . . . Let him play out his little act of power. His role in heaven lasts but for an hour."[527]

If, following Havelock, various aspects of humanity are represented in the characters of Prometheus, Zeus, and Zeus's representatives, then the myth told by Aeschylus expresses the conflict within humanity's consciousness between intellectual power and the distrust and fear of that power:

> . . . the total mood of the Greeks about man was complex. Their conception of his science was so complete that they took in not only what it meant in itself, as a mental discipline and a technological force, but also what its moral consequences would be. . . They were able to realize that it

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525. *Prometheus Unbound* survives only in fragments, but enough of it apparently is available to decode the ending.

526. Havelock 1950, 57.

527. *Prometheus Bound* 907–40, Havelock 1950.

> meant a revolution in age-long methods of feeling, and that thought it would make us different, it would not necessarily make us happy.[528]

Havelock argues that the Greeks present humanity as the victor, who through intelligence has prevailed, and yet has been defeated because despite technological power, he has learned his own insignificance: ". . . he lives ephemeral in a tiny space for a moment of time; he remains helpless before cosmic forces which exercise arbitrary control over his obscure destiny. This mood of fatalism persists from Homer to Thucydides and is not absent in Plato."[529] It is a contradictory account, lacking the same clarity that humanity lacks in its actions and its justifications.

Here as well as in *The Oresteia*, Aeschylus writes about the time when ideas about the status and powers of both men and gods were being created.[530] For example, in Pindar's *Pythian 3*, written around 474, Asclepius, the first mortal healer, can heal the sick and the dead,[531] suggesting that it was a later idea that the dead stay dead. By Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, written around 458, the finality of death was fixed. The chorus says ". . . a man's lifeblood is dark and mortal. Once it wets the earth what song can sing it back? Not even the master-healer who brought the dead to life—Zeus stopped the man before he did more

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528. Havelock 1950, 33.

529. Havelock 1950, 34.

530. Lattimore 1958, 47. D. J. Conacher (1980) discusses what he calls "The Zeus Problem" in chapter 6. Lloyd-Jones 1971, 95–103, refutes the thesis that Zeus of the *Prometheus* is different than the Zeus that appears elsewhere in Aeschylus. He argues there is no change in Zeus, no evolution here or elsewhere in Greek literature, that Zeus is always a complicated, contradictory, and confounding character.

531. *Pythian* 3.45–58.

harm."[532] This does not mean, of course, that the dates of these ideas determine social beliefs generally for these periods, but they provide clues.

In Genesis too, God forbids eating from the tree of the knowledge of "good and evil,"[533] and then sends Adam and Eve out of the garden so that they cannot also eat from the tree of life, of immortality.

> Here, the human has become like one of us, in knowing good and evil. So now, lest he send forth his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat and live throughout the ages . . . ! So YHWH, God, sent him away from the garden of Eden . . .[534]

Like the Hebrew God, Zeus sees that, thanks to Prometheus, humans have gained previously forbidden knowledge and they must be prevented from further incursions into divine territory, stopped from further harm. Prometheus, perhaps like the seductions of the snake in Genesis, represents intellect and is, for Havelock, "in competition with all the inherited terrors of traditional Mediterranean cult." When Havelock compares Greek thinking with Hebraic, he finds in the Greeks a tension dramatically pulling at their existence, with gods and limits on one side and on the other, intellect, imagination and curiosity. In the Hebrews, this tension is absent, he says, such that "in the Old Testament, man is completely dwarfed by his environment." God is everything; humanity is nothing. "All man's knowledge and judgment, left to its own devices, is vanity. To

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532. *Agamemnon* 1017–23.

533. Genesis 2: 16ff. "Good and evil" is a Hebraic idiom referring to knowledge and understanding.

534. Genesis 2: 22–24

realize any health in himself he must lean on, or identify with, a power without. He is sinful and blind."[535]

If this were true, Havelock's depiction of the Hebraic tradition would indeed provide a handy contrast to the Greek. His reading of the Pentateuch, however, is shallow. It misses the richness of intellectual courage and the sense of freedom that the Hebrew God grants humanity not only to explore the world, but, in the obligation of *Tikkun Olam*, to perfect it.[536] Rather than being powerless and "dwarfed by his environment," humanity is given the task to repair the world, which was left imperfect during the creation described by Genesis. On the Judaic account, human beings are given full intellectual power to complete the creation, but to do it within the context that the project is nevertheless within God's domain and that it is not the case that human power has dominion.

The issue of who or what has ultimate authority arises in *Prometheus Bound*, when Prometheus says that "craft is far weaker than necessity," which can be translated as "Science is weaker than nature is." The chorus then asks who is the steersman of necessity, of nature—to which Prometheus answers, "The triple-formed Fates and the remembering Furies."

This prompts the chorus to ask, "Is Zeus weaker than these?" Yes, Prometheus, asserts, for he, too, "cannot escape what is fated." What is fated, the chorus asks. At this, Prometheus declines to go further: "Inquire of this no

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535. Havelock 1950, 36.

536. *Tikkun Olam* is discussed in Frank and Leaman 1997, volume 2, 478, 871. Also see Yehuda Liebes 1993, 100, 112, 115–117, 126–128, 130–137, 139, 140–149, 194–200, 204–205, 208, 210; David Blumenthal 1988/1994, xxvi–xxii, 22–27, 54–55, 66–68; Walter Wurzburger 1954, 47ff.

further, do not entreat me. . . . it must be hidden with all care; for it is only by keeping it that I will escape my despiteful bondage and my agony."[537]

The question being asked is, what limitations form the parameters on Zeus's power and, perhaps, on the potential powers of humanity? The question seems to be left unanswered. We are not told with certainty whether the fates and furies rule Zeus or whether he equates the fates and furies with nature. He suggests but does not confirm that scientific inquiry will always fail in gaining full knowledge of nature. He seems to suggest that the power Zeus wields must operate within the limitations imposed by nature/fate/furies, but before he can be pressed for details he says "Press me no further" because he will not reveal the "terrible secret." Later, Prometheus refers to humanity as "these new gods of ours,"[538] and says he showed them how to see, how to survive in the world, and how to understand. He proudly claims to have opened an entrance for humans into God's walled-off terrain so that the "new gods" could learn to master the universe. But it seems clear from this that humanity, too, is subject to the same limitations. Thus, the concern about overstepping boundaries can extend not just to Zeus's realm but also to those proscriptions contained in nature itself, as well as those wielded by the fates and the furies.

For an Athenian audience, Lattimore says, Aeschylus's story was the depiction of "an insurrection in the community where a new aspirant rises against the enthroned master." Humanity is now able to gain mastery of things

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537. *Prometheus Bound* 512–25. The issue of Prometheus's knowledge of a secret fate for Zeus is first raised at line 254 when a mysterious plan to endanger Zeus's throne is mentioned. By 1393, Prometheus predicts that Zeus will "be humbled yet." And at 1410, "Nothing will save Him from the sharp plunge into shame, excruciating ruin."

that in the past had been reserved to divinities. It is the story of a shift in boundaries, symbolized by Prometheus's secret, which may be that whatever power Zeus holds, it would one day give way to the new gods. But Prometheus's knowledge is faulty as well and has limitations. He misjudged Zeus's ability to punish: "I was trying to help mortals and I hurt myself. And yet I never thought I could be punished so, so hung to dry upon the skyward rocks."[539] The audience would see this as a cautionary element in the tale, that human infringement on the old gods' territory and power can be tempting, perhaps even inevitable, but it comes tainted by Promethean hubris and so brings with it the constant possibility of misjudgment, failure, and punishment.

For Havelock, the resolution arrives in Aeschylus's sequel, when Prometheus is released, Zeus's power curtailed, and humanity's intellect let loose to explore. But for both Havelock and Lattimore, the resolution is muddied by the entirety of the Prometheus story.

Havelock says the story depicts humanity brought into collision with the universe. They pursue their interests enough to provoke the collision but they do not create it. If they did, disaster would be clearly traceable to humanity's faulty design and perhaps would be fixable. Instead, the genuine terror in Aeschylean tragedy "lies in the fact that the ultimate sanctions employed against man are not proportional to his admitted errors. The dilemma without is mirrored in the competition within the soul, between wisdom and arrogance, skill and delusion, strong resolution and abject demoralization. Man's ambition is betrayed by the

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538. *Prometheus Bound* 436ff.

539. *Prometheus Bound* 269–71.

events which happen to him, whether they represent the will of the gods or the turn of accident. . . . Is he bound to take risks to make himself vulnerable to fortune itself? Or should he accept the littleness and futility of his estate, and seek resignation and retreat before a universe with which he cannot compete, before which he is left naked and alone?"[540]

The Prometheus stories leave the problem unresolved. We are left with a suggestion that human intellect is perhaps allied with the natural universe, which is sympathetic to humanity and to humanity's making a place for itself. But humanity is in a cautious tension in the universe with a power, perhaps of Zeus and perhaps of the fates and furies, that, following Havelock, can crucify us, yet does not have the power to defeat us entirely. For Aeschylus, Zeus is not the universe, he is a force or a power of the universe, and he is an adversary of humanity. In this sense, Havelock is justified in contrasting the Greek tragic vision with the Judaic vision; the Hebrew God is creator and guide, installing humanity in the world to complete his creation. But the stories in both traditions contain the cautionary elements of fates and furies, in one guise or another. *Oedipus* similarly shows the complexity of the interaction among humanity, gods, fates, and furies when Oedipus, after suffering in exile, seems to become semi-divine.

The stories nicely demonstrate, too, that there is a difference between, on the one hand, humanity's seeking understanding of the universe and then using that understanding to make a place for themselves, and on the other, seeking immortality. Various stories seem to equate the quest for knowledge with the

quest for immortality, both of which are said to be within the divine realm, so that when men seek understanding it seems that ultimate understanding perhaps is the ability to live forever, and that once begun, humanity will not stop until they have eaten of the ambrosia and nectar that provide immortality. This is why, in the Judaic tradition, Adam and Eve had to be banished; they had eaten of knowledge and had to be prevented from tasting immortality.

In the Greek tradition, Zeus and his representatives also delimit knowledge by opposing excessive incursions. Prometheus might ultimately have to be released, but only after the limits are demonstrated. Both the complexity and the contradictions are developed in and through Prometheus, that arrogantly presumptuous being ("And now, my triumph intellectual! Next I invent the count numerical . . . The inventor I, who many a shape did show of science to mankind . . ."[541]) whose efforts to raise humanity to the level of gods symbolize those twinges of longing for immortality that we cannot seem to avoid because we are constantly reminded of our insignificance in the face of the gods and the universe. Charles Segal says that one of the elements of Prometheus's endowment is that he keeps technological man away from knowing about his own death, "and thus from contemplating the ultimate meaning of his life.[542] To develop the arts and sciences necessary for the basic needs of society, introspective concerns with identity and ultimate meanings are an obstacle, Segal

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540. Havelock 1950, 40–41.

541. *Prometheus Bound* 66ff.

542 Segal 2001, 5.

notes, and a "certain degree of metaphysical blindness is an advantage. Hence Prometheus' gift that we not know the day of our death."[543]

*Prometheus Bound* and its sequel contain all the elements that complicate human striving. It seems at times to negate the usual Greek tragic formula that arrogance and chance lead to disaster. Prometheus defies the gods, perhaps all of the universe, and not only does he ultimately survive, the very fact of his survival causes a kind of defeat for Zeus: "So, in his crashing fall shall Zeus discover how different are rule and slavery."[544] Yet Prometheus understands that the resolution is more complex, that both he and Zeus will come to an understanding and that both will welcome it:

> . . . that will of his shall melt to softness yet
> when he is broken in the way I know,
> and though his temper now is oaken hard
> it shall be softened: hastily he'll come
> to meet my haste, to join in amity
> and union with me—one day he shall come.[545]

These questions arise in similar form in the Jewish and Christian traditions, as we shall see in Genesis. In the eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and eveil, humans acquire knowledge over the objections of god. Later, humanity seeks to understand the universe and to master it with intellect and technology. The story told in Genesis explains how this began and how God responded so that the incursions on divine territory would be slowed if not stopped. When Adam and Eve are evicted from the Garden, god says he is keeping them away from the source of certain fundamental secrets, including

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543. Segal 2001, 5.

544. *Prometheus Bound* 925.

immortality. The casting out and the cautionary edicts that go with it are intended to warn humanity that some things should remain unknown, especially about god-like traits:

> YHWH, God, said: Here, the human has become like one of us, in knowing good and evil. So now, lest he send forth his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat and live throughout the ages . . .! So YHWH, God, sent him away from the garden of Eden. . . . and caused to dwell, eastward of the garden of Eden, the winged-sphinxes and the flashing, ever-turning sword to watch over the way to the Tree of Life.[546]

From Homer to Hesiod to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and the authors of Genesis, the fundamental warning is that while humanity's reach will always extend into previously forbidden places, the incursions have consequences and transgressing certain boundaries should be feared.

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g. Sophocles. *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*

*Summary*

*Oedipus Tyrannus*[547] opens with reports of a devastating plague ravaging Thebes and it is this that will be the central event around which the play unfolds. We learn that King Laius of Thebes had been told by a seer that he would be killed by his own son and in an effort to cheat fate puts a spike (or ankle pin)[548]

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545. *Prometheus Bound* 190–94.

546. Genesis 3.22–24.

547. Hereafter, *OT*.

548. The spike may have been intended to discourage passersby from rescuing the child, but Sophocles does not elaborate. This is a detail of the Oedipus myth that first appears in Sophocles, according to Segal, 29, who suggests that it points to how determined the parents were to ensure the boy did not live and thus escape fate. Another possibility could be that Sophocles was raising questions about the practice of infant exposure, and

through his child's feet and abandons him on Mt. Cithaeron. Oedipus was rescued by a shepherd, taken to Corinth, and raised there by the king and queen as their own son.

Warned by the Delphic oracle that he would kill his father and marry his mother, Oedipus fled Corinth. At a crossroads on his way to self exile in Thebes, he encounters Laius, not knowing who he is, and kills him during an argument. He continues the journey to Thebes, and there finds the city being ravaged by the Sphinx. Oedipus answers the Sphinx's riddle, which causes the beast's death.[549] In reward, the city's regent, Creon, gives Oedipus the throne and the hand of Laius's widow, Jocasta. Years later, the plague strikes and the Delphic oracle advises Creon to banish from Thebes the killer of King Laius. The seer Teiresias provides clues that Oedipus was the killer, but Oedipus does not understand until Jocasta reveals that Laius had been killed at a crossroads. Oedipus then sees, recalls the event, and tells Jocasta what had happened. She hangs herself, and Oedipus blinds both his eyes with the sharp pin of her brooch. Creon becomes king. Oedipus's fate is unresolved at the end of *OT*,[550] but we know from the cycle's subsequent stories that he leaves Thebes to wander as a beggar, blind and suffering.

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the spike serves to suggest an added emotionally charged insult. Gantz elaborates mightily on all other aspects of the Oedipus legends but does not discuss this. Infant exposure is dealt with again about 15 years after Oedipus in Euripides' *Ion*, where the mother's remorse plagues her life, *Ion* 954–63, 1369–79. For more on this, see Herodotus 1.112 and 5.92

549. By contrast, Hesiod's *Theogony*, at 326–32, refers to the Sphinx as a monster killed by Heracles because it had been ravaging Thebes, but no riddle is mentioned.

550. Hereafter, *OT*.

At the end of his suffering, which is told in the third of the cycle, *OC*, Oedipus travels to the grove of the Eumenides, the forest where oracles have said he will finish his life. He disappears there, and because his body is thought to remain among the trees, the place becomes blessed, providing protection for Athens. This depiction of Oedipus's suffering leading to blessedness is not the same idea that Aeschylus offers in *The Oresteia*, which is that suffering leads to wisdom. In Oedipus, the idea is that a person can be purified by suffering, which might have been the source for the Christian doctrine that a person can be redeemed by suffering. In *OC and OT*, the tragic hero violates two of the most basic rules of human community and is thus cursed, but he also is blessed by attributes of intelligence, leadership, and by his eventual ability to both suffer and seek understanding. It is the story of resolving, or at least accepting, the combination of opposites that exist in a human life: blessing and curse, suffering and understanding.

This is a story, like Sophocles' others, of the mystery that is at the center of what the gods want and what they do. In *OC* and *OT*, the gods' motivations are a curiosity, a puzzle, but they are not malevolent. Instead, as Bernard Knox describes it, the way of gods "... is, in some strange way that is beyond explanation, just."[551] Sophocles does not defend the morality of gods; he seems to accept them as incomprehensible beings who exist and act beyond human understanding. Instead of trying to make them comprehensible, he focuses on the heroic behavior and the greatness and dignity of human beings living with the consequences of their lives. Oedipus is not a villain suffering for his

551. Knox 1993, 35.

stupidities. If Sophocles finds villains anywhere, it is in Creon, who is willing to sacrifice the individual to the community, or Menelaus in *Ajax*, who does the same. Sophocles celebrates the dignity of the individual and finds in the complexity of individual choice the uncertainty of fate and the courage of action.

*Discussion*

*OT* is not the straightforward story of a hero punished for overreaching pride and abhorrent crimes.[552] It is the working out of the implications of a life that juxtaposes curse and blessings. The deeds for which he would suffer were preordained before his birth, so if there is culpability it does not seem that Oedipus carries a large measure of it. He does have traits, however, that enable the living out of his circumscribed fate: an impulsive intellect, quickness to anger, strength, integrity, and pride.

The story asks whether our lives are controlled by the external design of gods who are cruel or unjust. And if not controlled by design, then do the events of a life unfold by accident, which would be merely absurd? Sophocles suggests it is a fitful combination of the two, but a combination made more disorderly by the intrusion of luck and human willfulness. This reading has humanity living in what Charles Segal describes as "a tragic universe that does not correspond to a pattern of order or justice satisfactory to the human mind."[553] This universe skews human understanding by adding radical uncertainty to the mixture that includes the elusiveness of final truth and the remoteness of gods.

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552. Although Bowra 1944 does make that argument.

553. Segal 2001, 5.

Sophocles offers this at a time in Western history that was marked by the shift from mythical thinking to conceptual and abstract thought. The presocratics, then Plato and Aristotle, began presenting a world regularized by nonpersonal processes and predictable, scientific laws; a world that is measurable, analyzable, understandable. Plato argued that proper analysis of the good will yield understanding of how to act, and when this analysis is done properly, a right-thinking man will not be subject to the whims of unforeseeable fortune. This argument fit nicely with other developments of the time, including the Hippocratic claim that the cause of diseases is not divine, that "each of them has a nature of its own, and none arises without its natural cause."[554]

These efforts to understand the world and gain control of human lives are expressed in *Antigone* when in the first stasimon the chorus celebrates humanity's domination of the earth. Humanity seems unlimited, our reach and our control extending potentially in every direction. But *OT* and *OC* question all of this. They question the new skepticism about oracles and fate and the power of gods; and they question claims about humanity's ability to make sense of our lives. Whereas in Euripides' *Trojan Women* uncertainty is expressed about whether Zeus even exists, whether he is a "necessity of nature or the mind of mortals,"[555] in *OC* and *OT*, the gods are always a force capable of confounding human control; the mind and reach of mortals is limited by mysterious, uncontrollable forces that exist in the world. Even so, these forces exist in relationship to a humanity that is changing, and its relationship to the gods is

554. *Airs, Waters, Places* 22.1.c, 127. Similar sentiments are expressed in *On the Sacred Disease*, and elsewhere in the Hippocratic corpus.

555. *Trojan Women* 884–85.

also changing. Sophocles' world is no longer the archaic world of Homer and Hesiod; it is a world of swirling uncertainty. Oedipus's mistake, if one was made, was to believe he had outrun the archaic world that divined his fate. That world could not be outrun, or outthought, because it would be with him wherever he went. Segal says Sophocles presents in the *Oedipus* cycle a view of the world that is a combination of the world as it was becoming, in which humanity would seek rational understanding and attempt to keep gods at a distance, and the world still linked to the archaic mind. In this world that combines the past with the present, Oedipus finds that there are

> forces less amenable to human understanding and control. . . nature is not merely an inert, passive object for human domination but an organically connected network of animate beings that stand in delicately balanced, mutually responsive relations to one another. Imbalance or violation in one area will produce some kind of disturbance in another . . . [556]

When Oedipus sought to escape the oracle's knowledge, and when later he fails to see what Tieresias has tried to show him, he is unaware of the balance that is to be maintained. The disaster that results, and all that follows, may be much more damaging than the original crime. Victor Ehrengerg believes *OC and OT* are Sophocles' warning that rationalism can be taken too far if it leads to discounting the effects of fate and the gods.[557] Friedrich Nietzsche saw *Oedipus* as the paradigm of human guilt about his power to dominate nature. He says incest and parricide are "unnatural acts" that can be analogized to the domination and violence done to nature.[558] For Hegel, *OC* was more hopeful, showing human consciousness awakening to a moral and intellectual awareness.

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556. Segal 2001, 11.

557. Ehrengerg 1954, 67–69.

558. *Birth of Tragedy*, section 9.

He says Oedipus is the story of an ethical sense developing in humanity, as well as acknowledgement of guilt for crimes committed.[559]

*OC* was probably written in response to the difficulties of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, especially the plague that swept through Athens in 431. By 429, it had killed a fourth of Athens' population, including Pericles, and made Athenians wonder whether the gods had abandoned them, sending disease as punishment for some cataclysmic transgression. Thucydides reports that the plague brought with it a moral and psychological disintegration among the citizens,[560] including irreverence for the gods who had in the past protected them.[561] When in *OC* the plague cripples Thebes, it seems divinely created, as though in response to the enormity of incest and parricide as violations of absolute boundaries. The parallel of Oedipus's pollution and Athenian guilt, both of which bring plague, suggests the mystery of a world where our authority and intellect can easily be swept aside when we miscalculate the extent of their proper reach. This understanding becomes for Oedipus an unfolding of personal discovery. Oedipus relaxed in the comfort of his reign in Thebes, believing that the demonstration of his wisdom in leaving Corinth and then in answering the Sphinx's riddle would allow him to create a life of contentment and accomplishment.

Much of the power in *Oedipus* comes from what Sophocles does not spell out, thus leaving to imagination the working out of intentions, motivations, and

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559. Paolucci 1962, 279–80, 325–26.

560. Thucydides 2.53.

561. Thucydides 883–910.

resolution. *Oedipus* does not, for example, speak to the effect on Jocasta of her decision to expose her child. It does not discuss the emotional consequences or the pain of the original act of the decision itself. Euripides later deals with some of these issues in his *Ion*,[562] but Sophocles does not. The story does, however, describe several boundaries by which proper human action is demarcated from either improper action or from what is reserved to the gods. The most apparent is the proscription on incest and parricide. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, incestuous unions are said to be common during the evolution of the world order, often producing strange, sometimes monstrous beings, like the Sphinx. But because these occur during the still evolving beginning of the world and because it involves gods, no moral culpability seems to accrue; this is, as Penelope reminds us, just the way gods are.[563] For humans, however, incest is said to lead to disaster because it crosses a human boundary of proper action.[564]

Similarly, both Oedipus and Jocasta try to set aside the authority of oracles and seers, seeking either to cheat their predictions or diminish their power. Jocasta tries to show that the oracle is unreliable[565] even though two times she reminds us that Apollo by way of the oracle had said Laius would be killed by his son.[566] Oedipus rejects Teiresias's prophecy of disaster for the slayer

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562. Note 473, above, discusses the spiking of Oedipus's feet.

563. *Odyssey* 4.692

564. Phoenix, the *Iliad*, 9.448–77, fights with his father because at his mother's request he slept with his father's concubine. Similarly, in Genesis and elsewhere, incest is reported in such a way that it is uncertain whether moral disapproval is suggested. Hellenistic writers also wrote much about incest, but generally to condemn it as the behavior of non-Greeks or of tyrants.

565. *OT* 711–12.

566. *OT* 713–14, 854.

of Laius when he declares, "But if I saved this city I do not care."[567] This hubristic response does not bring on the predicted doom. Neither does Oedipus's haste and quickness to anger cause the inevitable suffering. Causation in *Oedipus* is not as direct as Sophocles makes it in *Ajax* when he says

> Look well at this, and speak no towering word
> Yourself against the gods, nor walk too grandly
> Because your hand is weightier than anothers,
> Or your great wealth deeper founded. One short day
> Inclines the balance of all human things
> To sink or rise again. Know that the gods
> Love men of steady sense and hate the proud.[568]

Instead, *Oedipus* points to the complexity of assigning provenance to the way this or any other life plays out, because it is unclear whether or to what degree Oedipus accrues guilt from his actions, and if he does, whether sense can be made of this in relationship to his preordained fate. The efforts by Oedipus and Jocasta to set aside fate and prophecy are portrayed as examples of the mistake humanity makes when it comes to believe it can control events. But the trilogy is not about whether human lives are determined.[569] Neither does it point with certainty to the causes of suffering. Destiny and causation are raised as problems, but Sophocles provides neither answers nor resolution. Philip Vellacott says the play portrays issues of destiny and choice as "a box of mirrors to bewilder each new generation; the whole tangle is here in this story. . . . The play offers to each spectator as much as he is capable of seeing."[570]

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567. *OT* 443.

568. *Ajax* 126–33 (John Moore, tr. In Grene and Lattimore).

569. Karl Reinhardt 1979, 98, argues that for Sophocles, as for the Greeks generally, fate is not the same as predetermiation, "but is a spontaneous unfolding of daimonic power, even when the fate has been foretold."

570. Vellacott 1971, 108.

Elise Garrison says issues related to oracles in Greek tragedy often exist to show that there is a curtain, or distance, between human knowledge and divine will.[571] Sophoclean irony is employed to show the absurdity of human attempts to overcome their limitations. When Oedipus or Jocasta defy or resist oracles, the chorus is usually nearby, ready to point out the likelihood of disaster that will result. Garrison argues that *OT* may be seen as an examination of impiety, especially in Jocasta's and Oedipus's skepticism about oracular statements.[572] After Teiresias's revelations, Jocasta tries to allay Oedipus's fears by saying human beings are not skilled at prophecy.[573] Oedipus, hopeful but growing more skeptical, agrees.[574] Even the chorus seems skeptical of the oracle[575] and Jocasta claims that it is not the gods and oracles that control events, but instead, random chance.[576] When Oedipus finally understands what he has done, his attitude alters and he believes fully in the powers of fate, chance, and gods. So, presumably, does Jocasta.[577] But her response is very different; she commits suicide, and the chorus says it was an appropriate end.[578] She had been the one who most directly questioned traditional beliefs about human limitations and divine control. Garrison says the story is about human illusions of control:

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571. Garrison 1995, 51.

572. Garrison 1995, 103.

573. *OT* 707–10, 723–24.

574. *OT* 859.

575. *OT* 897–902, 906–10.

576. *OT* 977.

577. *OT* 1071ff., 1445, 1458.

578. *OT* 1367–68.

> The heavy tragic irony of Oedipus' inability to see while sighted has been pointed out relentlessly, but his continued existence shows exactly how ephemeral is the illusion of control grounded in human knowledge, and how futile. One must live in full awareness of one's humanness and therefore of one's limited knowledge.[579]

Various interpretations of Oedipus have emphasized either Oedipus as a hero asserting his courage, energy, and grandeur, or as the polluted would-be hero who failed to listen to the gods. The former includes Cedric Whitman, who sees Oedipus as representing in humanity that determination to learn the truth and the strength to live with whatever has been dealt.[580] Whitman denies that a tragic flaw caused the suffering. Bernard Knox views Oedipus as more troublesome, finding excessive stubbornness and a view of himself and his capacities that overreach what is proper. Knox argues that Oedipus comprises greatness of spirit with egotism and narrowness of vision.[581] In the former, Oedipus becomes symbolic of doubt and anguish, of mistake and tragedy, even an asserti0on that his life suggests the lack of meaning and justice in the universe. The latter interpreters include C. M. Bowra, who argues that *Oedipus* is a straightforward morality tale in which the gods topple Oedipus, who is guilty of crimes that are abhorrent to humanity and gods. Bowra says the lesson is that life is precarious and so care must be taken to honor moral laws.[582] Decades later, E. R. Dodds and R. P. Winnington-Ingram[583] agree with Bowra that Oedipus transgressed the laws of heaven and earth, but they say he is morally and legally

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579. Garrison 1995, 112.

580. Whitman 1951, 30ff.

581. Knox 1964, 140.

582. Bowra 1944, 220.

583. Dodds 1966, 37–49. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 211.

innocent, that his punishment violates human understanding of justice. Tragedy thus results from the difference between the way the universe often works and the way we think it should. The gods on this account are mysterious and their ways unknowable. That, combined with the way human nature works, is the source of suffering.

As the *Oedipus* cycle proceeds, it more clearly becomes the story of the hero gradually coming to understand limitation, to see the vagaries of human life, and to accept uncertainty and the consequences of pollution (deserved or not) in the suffering of his misery-laden exile. *OT* depicts a hero plagued by misfortune and unpredictability. *OC* balances this with showing the futility of seeking complete understanding and the necessity of redress for pollution.[584]

Some things must properly lie outside our understanding, and Teiresias's foreknowledge points to the existence of things in our lives that are not capable of ordinary human knowledge, the acceptance of which may lead to tragic wisdom. Teiresias's knowledge points to the existence of an order operating in the world. This order is *dike*, and in *Oedipus*, *dike* is what Segal refers to when he explains the cause of the disorder in Oedipus's life: "the crimes of Oedipus, regardless of his moral guilt, are a source of this kind of disorder, and the violence that he has released will return to his world and his life."[585] This may be what is described at the beginning of the third choral ode when the chorus says a

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584. In *OC*, Oedipus's new knowledge seems to be an almost supernatural understanding. He has knowledge of his final resting place (~~44–46~~, 72–74, 287–90) and he understands what the oracles are saying to him (391–420, 450–60). The ending is marked by divine signs, including a voice from the heavens, thunder from Zeus Chthonios, Oedipus's new ability to see although blind, and the intense light that causes Theseus to hide his eyes (1604–55).

moral order emanates from the gods, that it is timeless, ageless, and is not born from mortal nature.[586] This order, or set of laws, is presented as determined by and perhaps enforced by some force that is not only beyond human control but is outside the realm of humanity, perhaps outside time. To understand the nature and source of this ordering system would require to be like gods, free of the tragic intrusions of change, mistakes, and punishment. Human beings are not like gods, the chorus reminds us, and so must accept the way things are.

*Dike* acting in *Oedipus* restores balance that has been knocked askew by behavior that is outside human limits. Oedipus prefigures the needed restoration of order when he criticizes the Thebans for failing to find Laius's killer: "For even if the matter had not been urged on by a god, it was not fitting for you to leave it so uncleansed."[587] That order is restored by punishment far out of proportion to the degree of guilt, forces us to raise questions about the nature of *dike*. This may be why the chorus in *OC* asserts: "Not to be born wins every accounting; and by far second best is when born to return there whence one has come as quickly as possible."[588]At the same time, uncertainty about the composition of *dike* allows us to see Oedipus as being like Adam and other heroes: he shows us glimpses of what is properly in our domain, but at the same time confounds our efforts to understand with anything like certainty the location of the boundary. *Oedipus* is an inquiry into the composition of the universe and how it may affect human well-being.

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585. Segal 1991, 58.

586. *OT* 866–72.

587. *OT* 255–56.

h. Sophocles. *Antigone*

*Summary*

*Antigone* is the third part in the temporal sequence of the *Oedipus* trilogy. Its action unfolds after Oedipus disappears into the grove of the Eumenides at the end of *OC*. In *OT*, just before Oedipus went into exile as a blind, wandering beggar, he cursed his two sons for consenting to his banishment. The sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, agreed to occupy the throne on alternator years, but Eteocles banished his brother. This led to a war between the brothers and their armies, and eventually to a fight between the two brothers that ended in their killing each other. Creon succeeded to the throne and decreed that because Polyneices rebelled against the throne when his brother held it, he had violated the city's laws and as punishment his body could not be buried. Antigone, one of Oedipus's daughters, complains that the decree violates divine laws requiring that the dead be honored by burial.

When she violates Creon's order and buries Polyneices, Creon has her arrested[589] and condemns her to be buried alive. Creon's son, Haemon, who is betrothed to Antigone, fails to get his father to stay the decision.[590] Tieresias warns Creon[591] that he is going too far, that he is offending the gods by leaving

588. *OC* 1224–28. This follows Plutarch in *Consolation to Apollonius*, 115d: "For mortals, best of all is not to be born."

589. *Antigone* 404ff.

590. *Antigone* 635ff.

591. *Antigone* 988ff.

dead bodies unburied,[592] and convinces the king to change his mind. Creon sets out to bury Polyneices and rescue Antigone, but he is too late; Antigone and Haemon kill themselves, and Creon's wife Eurydice stabs herself to death when she learns that Haemon is dead.[593]

*Discussion*

The *Antigone* is a direct inquiry into the proper limits of human laws and human action. There are other themes, and as we shall see, David Grene suggests an entirely different theme as Sophocles' primary concern. The most common interpretation, however, is that *Antigone* is a statement about the struggle between individual conscience, or perhaps god's law, and the authority of the state. It is a complex interweaving that asks about our place in the universe; it asks whether man is the measure of all things, or merely an overreaching part of a larger concern framed by the danger and incomprehensibility of out-of-reach gods. In the latter sense, and on Antigone's account of it, Creon's order to leave Polyneices' body unburied for carrion eaters to gnaw at assumes authority that rightly rests in a divine realm.

This delimitation of borders occurs directly and indirectly throughout *Antigone,* as it does elsewhere in Sophocles. Sometimes, as in *OT,* it is spoken of as a geographical limit, but with metaphysical implications: the Olympians exist

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592. A similar argument is made at the *Odyssey* 11.50ff, when Odysseus encounters his former companion, Elpenor, whose body had been left behind in Circe's palace, "unburied and unwept" because Odysseus had to leave quickly for his journey to Hades. At 11.70–74, Elpenor beseeches Odysseus when he leaves Hades to return to Aiaia, burn his body and build a grave mound for him, warning that otherwise his unburied body might bring the gods' curse upon Odysseus.

593. *Antigone* 1183ff.

mostly in another realm, on high mountains inaccessible to humans. Similarly, in the *Trachiniae*, two inaccessible geographical realms are mentioned: the rivers of Aetolia where the lustful monsters of Deianeira's past live, and on the peak of Oeta, where Zeus rules. In *Antigone*, the cave where she is sent to die is said to be the realm of Hades. Earlier in the story, this world and the heavens, momentarily come together when a dust storm rages as "a grief of the heavens;" the storm blowing across the plain where Polyneices' body lies unburied is a coming together of the human and divine worlds because, as Teiresias sees, the world order has been disturbed. Similarly, while Creon pronounces confidence in the steadiness and control of his ship of state[594] (along with the control over the sea celebrated in the Ode on Man[595]), the second stasimon opens with the turbulence of dark seas and the violence of nature to provide a counterpoint to Creon, as if to point out that his control may become subject to the irrationality and violence of the curse that Antigone bears and which Creon will share.[596]

A boundary is also demarcated between the proper place for female lament and funerary rituals. Segal argues that a significant tension in the play is between the primacy of the city and its male rulers in matters dealing with death, and Antigone's "desperate female mourning" that challenges the claims of the city.[597] When Eurydice exits after hearing of her son's death, the messenger hopes she will observe the city's traditions in her mourning by not lamenting in

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594. *Antigone* 162ff, 178, 189–90.

595. *Antigone* 332ff.

596. *Antigone* 599–603.

597. Segal 1995, 120–21.

public,[598] but instead staying inside her house.[599] This tension between private and public is echoed, of course, in the dispute between Creon and Antigone, and between Haemon and Creon. The delimiting lines between each raises questions about whether the gods establish boundaries or are they human constructs. This is clearly drawn by the depiction of Creon trying to separate out the city as a realm governed by the rationality of men, not subject to the uncertainties of mysterious divinities. When his claim of authority in the polis is belied by Teiresias's telling what will result from failing to bury the dead, Creon understands that he has reached too far.[600]

Another boundary exists in the play itself, perhaps exists in all Greek tragedy. This is the boundary between the audience wanting to find explanations and solutions for the suffering it sees and the tragedy resisting the question, declining to offer an orderly finish to the struggle; the audience wants to know both why things happened as they did and how to prevent it in their own lives. Whereas Bowra saw tragic drama demonstrating how the gods tidily punishing transgressors,[601] Sophocles in *Antigone* suggests, with Aristotle,[602] that justice as humans construct it is not necessarily a concern of the gods.

Perhaps, but the warnings of Teiresias may argue that when they choose, the gods will respond clearly when boundaries are defiantly violated. Men may

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598. Funerary motifs in *Antigone* are discussed in Tyrrell and Bennett 1998.

599. *Antigone* 1244–50.

600. *Antigone* 998–1032.

601. Bowra 1944, 220.

602. *Poetics* 13 and 14.

not be allowed to cross into divine realms, but the divine has no such proscription. Creon's defiance brings this prophecy:

> Know well, the sun will not have rolled its course
> many more days, before you come to give
> corpse for these corpses, child of your own loins.
> For you've confused the upper and lower worlds.
> You sent a life to settle in a tomb;
> you keep up here that which belongs below
> the corpse unburied, robbed of its release.
> Not you, nor any god that rules on high
> can claim him now.
> You rob the nether gods of what is theirs.
> So the pursuing horrors lie in wait
> to track you down. The Furies sent by Hades
> and by all gods will even you with your victims.[603]

Teiresias's warning blurs the boundaries between the heavens and the earth, between Hades and this world, and thus belies Creon's claim for autonomous authority in the city. The various themes contained in *Antigone* exist in complex layers, often overlapping one another. The play at once seeks to find the proper place for the public, male authority of the polis, and then upsets that place when the chorus offers its support to Antigone. At one turning point in the play when Creon confesses that he erred[604] and the chorus points out that he sees the way of justice too late,[605] Sophocles seems to be preparing a conclusion. But in the next moment he deflects responsibility: "Yes, I have learned in sorrow. It was a god who struck, who has weighted my head with disaster; he drove me to wild strange ways, . . ."[606] And so, unlike Antigone and Oedipus, Creon seems to get exactly what he deserves from fate; he valued civic power and loyalty over

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603. *Antigone* 1064–77.

604. *Antigone* 1261–69.

605. *Antigone* 1270.

606. *Antigone* 1271–73. Also see above, note 408, on *ate* as a source of causation.

personal and family ties, which he had claimed as within the jurisdiction of the polis rather than in the privacy of friendship and family: ". . . he who counts another greater friend than his own fatherland, I put him nowhere."[607]

Pointing to the similarity between the dilemma of Creon in *Antigone* and of Oedipus in *OT*, David Grene argues that the Sophoclean focus in both is the contrast between the two heads of state: In both a king has made a decision which is disobeyed or questioned by his subjects. In both, the ruler misconstrues the role of the rebel and his own as a sovereign. In both, he has a crucial encounter with the priest Teiresias, who warns him that the forces of religion are against him. In both, he charges that the priest has been suborned.

The two plays diverge at that point, however. Creon crumbles, fearful about his position and tries to correct his mistake. Oedipus refused to listen to anyone until self knowledge begins simmering in him and he sees what has happened, but even then he remains stronger and more defiant than Creon. Grene says that even with the divergences, Sophocles' intention in the trilogy as a whole seems to be the theme developed in Creon's actions, rather than the pitting of individual against society.[608]

In *Antigone*, following Grene, the ruler makes a wrongful decision, though in good faith, and then is opposed in a way he misunderstands and this induces him to persist in the mistake. In *OT*, the ruler unintentionally violates divine law, and then is destroyed by the workings of divine law in society. Grene says the theme is thus about "how the ruler who breaks the divine law may, for all he can

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607. *Antigone* 182–91.

see and understand, be entirely innocent, but nonetheless his guilt is an objective fact."[609] There are boundaries, and our lacking the senses to know them does not mean we will not suffer when we violate them.

By the end of the trilogy this is clear. Sophocles declares in *OC* that Oedipus's sin is real even if he did not know he was sinning. Further, his punishment—knowledge of his crimes and the loneliness and misery of his exile—may well be undeserved. But Grene argues "that the will and the consciousness are also some measure of man's sin—and when the sinner sinned necessarily and unwittingly, his suffering can be compensation enough for his guilt. He may at the end be blessed and a blessing."[610] For Grene, Sophocles was interested in the person who is both blessed and cursed. He points to a similar concern in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, the story of a lame castaway, plagued by his condition, who would rise from his suffering to be the conqueror of Troy. In this light, the concern is not what Philoctetes did wrong, or whether Oedipus chose the actions that caused his fall; the concern is, "how does it feel to be an object both of disgust and of fear to your fellows, while you yourself are simultaneously aware of the injustice."[611]

Grene's rendering of Sophoclean theme suggests the possible importance of the difference between Creon's response to disaster at the end of *Antigone* and Oedipus's response at the end of *OT*: Creon is broken, Oedipus is not. Both

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608. Grene 1960, 2ff.

609. Grene 1960, 2ff.

610. Grene 1960, 5.

611. Grene 1960, 7.

suffer, but only one is destroyed. In *Antigone*, Creon wants only to die after the deaths of his son and wife.[612] Oedipus, despite the misery of seeing the course of his life and the pain it has caused, is still defiantly strong. Creon complains about Oedipus' stubbornness: "Do not seek to have mastery in everything, for those things in which you had mastery did not follow along with you in your life."[613]

Similarly, in *OT*, Oedipus recalls that the oracle had said, "I would show forth to humankind a race unendurable to look upon,"[614] and indeed Oedipus cites as one of the reasons for blinding himself, the sight of his children, "born as they were born."[615] But by the end of the play—however he feels about his sons—Oedipus does not see his daughters as an accursed race; he seeks their presence, and Antigone accompanies him both in the misery of his wanderings and in his end at the grove of the Eumenides. Again, the heroic Oedipus is himself accursed, and knows his family shares in it, but the company of his daughters and the near divinity of his ending is the counterpoint to his suffering.

While Sophocles may have developed this conclusion while writing the *OC*, it is not apparent in the *Antigone*. By the end of the *OC* Oedipus transcends the violence and misery of his house and of Thebes; in *Antigone* his daughters have transcended nothing. Antigone and her sister Ismene are heiresses of the blood curse that flows down through the house, inheriting self destruction and doom from Laius and their father. *OC* ends with the polluted, suffering beggar

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612. *Antigone* 1321–25, 1339–46. Also see the discussion of Creon at the end of *Antigone* in Charles Segal 1995, especially 128–32.

613. *OT* 1522–23.

614. *OT* 791–2.

615. *OT* 1375–77.

transformed into a hero who would protect Athens by the proximity of his resting place.[616] Antigone ends by proving merely that Oedipus was right when he laments her unmarriageability, predicting that his daughters will "die as barren fields and unmarried."[617] Antigone's intended bridegroom, instead of joining her in marriage, goes to her "house of Hades" for a union in death.[618] Oedipus may have learned from catastrophic experience, but neither he nor his family can ever escape what they are. They still contain the passions, the willfulness that circumscribe their lives and the future of their house. The myth of Oedipus, which encompasses everything from Cadmus to Laius and Antigone, is a tale of curses and the human inability to see either the gods' justice or the comprehensibility of their laws.

Lloyd-Jones argues that in *Antigone*, the importance of the family curse is "considerable."[619] When Antigone and her intended husband are destroyed, their fate is the result of *Ate*, a kind of foolishness, perhaps an insanity that blinds them to where their actions are leading.[620] Their recklessness, however, comes from the gods,[621] at least partly because Antigone has "run against the high

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616. This conclusion is comparable to Orestes' acquittal of matricide in *The Oresteia*. There, acquittal suggests that a polluted past is purified when the system that allowed family vengeance to satisfy justice is replaced by a court of law and establishment of civic cult. But the comparison then fades because the Eumenides ends with a certain satisfaction in the transformation of the Furies. *OC*, however, ends with the promise of the curse on the House of Laius continuing with the deaths of Oedipus's sons, and then the avoidable death of Antigone after she returns to the slaughtering ground of Thebes. An interesting treatment of this is in Segal 2001, 137; Also Segal 1981, 401–405.

617. *OT* 1502.

618. *Antigone* 1234–41.

619. Lloyd-Jones 1971, 111.

620. *Antigone* 603.

621. *Antigone* 205ff, 604ff

pedestal of Justice with your foot (and is) making atonement, I think, with an ordeal come to you by inheritance."[622]

*Antigone* has none of the *OC's* mitigation of blessing mixed with curse, or at least it does not render Antigone redeemed by suffering, understanding, or apotheosis. Like, *OC*, however, *Antigone* does portray its heroine as a mixture of reckless disregard accompanied by her attempt to thwart Creon's disrespect for divine law. In this respect, following her father, Antigone suffers miserably but remains assured that whatever recklessness she displayed, her intentions and her position were pious. Unlike Creon, she believes she does not deserve her fate. When her sister Ismene tells her she was "wrong from the start, to chase what cannot be," Antigone replies, anticipating with self-righteous fury the glory of martyrdom, "If that's your saying, I shall hate you first, and next the dead will hate you in all justice. But let me and my own ill-counseling suffer this terror. I shall suffer nothing as great as dying with a lack of grace."[623] Antigone suffered the same predicament as Archbishop Thomas of Becket, but he at least understood that he risked "doing the right deed for the wrong reason"; he saw the seduction of martyrdom in his resisting King Henry II's demands to acquiesce and support his petition for divorce. The chorus later tells Antigone she was ruined by self-willed passion—"self-sufficiency has brought you down"—but they concede that because she showed respect for the dead, "we are for you"[624] and, as Lloyd-Jones says, her death indeed will be "glorious."[625]

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622. *Antigone* 852ff.

623. *Antigone* 92ff.

624. *Antigone* 872–75.

625. Lloyd-Jones 1971, 117.

This is a vision of the world always on the verge of chaos and sometimes tilting entirely into unpredictability. The human search for meaning and order is thus kept off balance. The Sophoclean message is not reassuring: however good the intention, recklessness in the end will allow fate and the unknowable workings of the gods to have your head. The third stasimon, which discusses love, defines human life primarily in terms of what cannot be controlled: who has love within him is mad, the chorus says, "You twist the minds of the just. Wrong they pursue and are ruined. You made this quarrel of kindred before us now."[626] To Creon's regret, he scorned the authority of eros and so called down upon himself the elemental and divine forces. "Never will I trembling with fear of a pollution allow him to be buried,"[627] Creon tells Tieresias. But Eros and divinity together shatter rational humanity's claim of dominion over nature and fate. Creon learns by the pollution that follows his crimes that he cannot "battle necessity."[628] His inversion of upper and lower realms, life and death, causes an imbalance in the world; his punishment is certain: "The late-destroying avengers of Hades and the gods, the Furies, lie in wait for you," warns Teiresias.[629]

Early in the story's development, the "Ode on Man" praises humanity for being the world's civilizer, for bringing language, law, medicine, agriculture, the ability always to help himself with never a need to face the future helpless.[630] It seems to support Creon's position when he claims that his state is governed by

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626. *Antigone* 781–93.

627. *Antigone* 1042.

628. *Antigone* 1105.

629. *Antigone* 1075.

enlightened secular rationalism. But the entire tragedy is built around the negation of humanity's claimed control. Its violence belies civilization; its series of disasters uproot city and family. Sophocles draws a portrait of humanity as not merely unable to control its excesses, it is helpless before the gods. Humanity's inability to control its savagery and to learn leaves them as creatures subject to the vagaries of chance, to the powers of fate.[631]

The final demonstration of humanity's vulnerability comes in Antigone's fifth stasimon, the ode to Dionysus. It marks a change in Thebes from its reliance on rationalism to a marked uncertainty. Segal finds in the ode the city's movement to "the god in whom the usual barriers erected between civilization and the wild break down. His very being, as Euripides illustrates in the *Bacchae*, calls civilization into question. . . . Dionysus is to the limits of reason what Antigone's deeply feminine loyalties to the ties created by the womb are to the masculine loyalties toward the polis."[632] The entry of Dionysus into Thebes, then, is the city's attempt to reconcile its contradictory elements, to transform its savage fury into Dionysiac ecstasy, to assuage its curses and hatreds by reveling in the mystery of the gods.

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i. Euripides. The *Bacchae*

*Summary*

*The Bacchae* was presented posthumously in 405 BCE and is said to speak more significantly to modern audiences than any other Greek tragedy. The story

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630. *Antigone* 332–375.

631. *Antigone* 951.

632. Segal 1981, 202.

is about the Theban king, Pentheus, who seeks to govern himself and his city entirely by reason and Dionysus, the half-human god, sometimes called Bacchus, who represents emotion, enthusiasm, and ecstatic rituals unbounded by normal conventions. Dionysus arrives in Thebes after establishing his religion in Asia. He appears as a human participant in his cult and is accompanied by a chorus of women devotees. His intention is to establish Bacchic worship in Thebes and then spread it throughout Greece. Dionysus is the son of Zeus and a mortal mother, Semele, Pentheus's aunt. Thebes at first rejects him, scorns his claim to divinity, and ignores his religion. The story is about the madness and slaughter he invokes to punish Thebes. At the end of the story Dionysus is clearly established as a god.

Pentheus resists introduction of Dionysian rites to his city and in reprisal, Dionysus inflicts all Theban women with madness, including Pentheus's mother, Agave. They become *maenads*, "mad women," who leave the city to conduct orgiastic rituals in the forests outside the city. The Theban prophet Teiresias and Cadmus, Agave's and Semele's father, have also joined the Dionysian religion and they tell the king that Dionysus exists as a force of nature, born of a mortal and a god, and is the proper object of worship. Pentheus resists and begins to hunt down the god and his followers. Before he can start, Dionysus is brought before the king as a captive in human form. The king derides Dionysus, and imprisons him, but the prison is destroyed in an earthquake, freeing the god.

Pentheus and Dionysus meet again and this time, sensing Pentheus's curiosity about the women's rituals, Dionysus leads the king into the forest to spy on the maenads. To keep from being noticed, Pentheus dresses as a woman while Dionysus tells the chorus he has sent Pentheus into a trap. The chorus speaks

happily about the joy of Bacchic worship and about triumphing over their enemy, which they say is a show of power of the gods to rebuke human stupidity. They call on the Bacchantes and Dionysus to kill the offenders. A messenger arrives reporting that his mother and aunts have torn Pentheus to pieces. Agave enters, carrying her son's head and asking the chorus to join in her victory. The chorus accepts the victory of the god but not the madness of Agave. Cadmus arrives carrying the rest of Pentheus's body and brings Agave back from her madness to realize what she has done. Dionysus returns as a god to tell Cadmus and Agave that they are exiled and that Cadmus and his wife will be turned into serpents, all as punishment for having questioned his divinity.

*Discussion*

The *Bacchae* is among other things a cautionary tale warning that humans should honor what rightfully belongs to the gods, but that human beings perhaps should not expect too much from them except mystery and disorder. Revere the gods, accept that they have their own ways, but be wary. When the messenger describes Pentheus's brutal death, he says, "To have good sense and revere what belongs to the gods is the noblest thing. I think this the wisest possession too for the mortals who enjoy it."[633] And Cadmus adds, "If there is anyone who scorns the gods, let him believe in gods when he looks at this man's death."[634]

Like the story of Gilgamesh, *The Bacchae* is about the difference between mortal and immortal, between what humanity seeks and what the gods, or the universe, limit. By way of Agave, Cadmus, and Pentheus, the city comes

633. *Bacchae* 1150–52.

634. *Bacchae* 1325–26.

tragically to understand that humanity does not triumph over the gods and the laws of *dike*; at best, humanity exists in a tension between its mortality and its quest for immortality or other god-like powers, between what is properly within human domain and what is the domain of divinity, between order and chaos. But it also depicts dramatically the fundamental changes in the way people thought about gods and their relationship with them at a time when the culture and many civic understandings were in chaos. The paradoxes of Dionysian religion and of the god himself reflect paradoxes that were becoming increasingly evident during the Peloponnesian War. A pervasive uncertainty perplexed the region and its relationship with the gods was a central part of that. Martin Buber would say many centuries later that human representations of the relation with God change, "but the truth of the relation is unchangeable because it stands in eternal mutuality; it is not man who defines his approach to it but the creator who in the unambiguity of man's creation has instituted the approach."[635] When the *Bacchae* was presented on the Athenian stage, it offered no such consolation; it suggested instead that the gods themselves spread disorder and if it is order that is needed, it might be necessary to look elsewhere, or coming to whatever understanding with gods is possible.

When Agave and the maenads join in the Dionysiac revelries, they seek wisdom, which is held out as a tantalizing reward throughout the play. They think wisdom will come by joining with the god, but they learn that wisdom comes in recognizing their separateness from divinity. For example, when Agave slaughters her son "she was mad, stark mad, possessed by Bacchus" and ignored

635. Buber 1948, 75.

Pentheus's cries of pity.[636] The god "had put inhuman power in her hands"[637] and once shed of the possession she learns that joining with the gods is not the proper place for human beings. The messenger who brings news that she has ripped apart her son's body while joined in ecstatic revelry with Bacchus reminds the community that they must learn the wisdom of revering what belongs to the gods and not to human beings.[638]

When Franz Kafka wrote about Prometheus and the attempt by men to be like gods, he says "The legend tries to explain the inexplicable, but, since it comes from a ground of truth, it must end once more in the inexplicable."[639] Even the god's birth is entirely out of the ordinary, an entirely supernatural event: After being born to Semele of a union with Zeus, Dionysus was sewn up in his father's thigh, creating an artificial womb to hide him from Hera, who was angry at Zeus's adultery.[640]

Euripides ends *The Bacchae* with a similar lack of explanation, but he differs from Homer, Hesiod, and Aeschylus in that for him the gods are a source of disorder rather than of order. In the *Bacchae* this turns up in the denouement as a balance between the irrational forces that plague human experience and possibility of a new order to replace the uncertainties of Greek life during this period. Charles Segal says the *Bacchae* can best be understood in the historical context of the scale and violent atrocities of the Peloponnesian War. He says this

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636. *Bacchae* 1124.

637. *Bacchae* 1128.

638. *Bacchae* 1150–52.

639. Kafka 1958, 82.

"made men more keenly aware of how precarious are the ordered forms of civilized life."[641]

Euripides depicted the breakdown and disintegration of civilization not just in the *Bacchae,* but also in the *Medea, Hecuba, Trojan Women,* and *Phoenissae*. The *Medea,* produced in 431, the year the war began, shows what happens when the passions of love turn into hatred and ferocity. Segal says its heroine depicts the traditional passivity of woman changed to a murderous revenge that destroys maternal love and leaves the male antagonist "impotent and shattered."

In the *Bacchae,* like the *Hippolytus,* the potential destructiveness of the emotional life centers on woman as the "symbol and the focal point for the irrationality that the polis must suppress." The *Bacchae* shows how the destructive power of the irrational annihilates the city itself. The hierarchical separation of god, man, and beast, Segal asserts, "breaks down as the god appears in the form of bull, snake, or lion and is present to his worshipers in the holy *thiasos,* the ecstatic band of maenads." The king's death is a symbolic rending of the city itself, "no longer able to integrate emotionality and religious ecstasy into the order of civic institution and law."[642] Order collapses entirely with the bestial metamorphosis of the old king, Cadmus, who had founded Thebes, and with the exile of the queen mother Agave after she kills her son.

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640. *Bacchae* 88–98.

641. Segal 1986, 33–34.

642. Segal 1986, 34.

The *Bacchae* is among the most direct of Greek stories in depicting the complex relationships between mortal and divine: the differences between them, the limitations of human life, and the striving of human beings to experience and often be a part of, even like the sacred. Segal sees depicted in tragedy a series of linked polarities—mortal and divine, male and female, man and beast, city and wild—that "encompass not just the emotional, interior world of the individual character or spectator but the whole of society in its multiple relationships to the natural and supernatural order."[643]

Dionysus on this account is the inbetween and often uncertain place humans being often find themselves in, somewhere between respecting and transgressing boundaries, between the old and the new, between the ecstatic and the ordered. As such, Simon Price asserts that Dionysus played a critical role both within and outside the conventional religious choices. The god's ambivalent status and purpose was partly the result of his alleged origin on the margins of the Greek world, in Thrace or Phrygia, and so he could have dual purposes: He was the center of civic cults, as at Athens; he played an important role at Delphi; and some of his rites involved "bizarre and abnormal behavior." On Mount Parnassos above Delphi, for example, women acted as maenads in the nocturnal festival of Dionysus and "were believed to tear wild animals apart in a shocking version of animal sacrifice."[644] Initiations into the rites of Dionysus involved the temporary abandonment of reason, a kind of divine possession that Plato would specifically ban for the ideal city of the *Laws*. He found it unfitting for citizens and so prohibited "all Bacchic dances and those of a similar nature in which the

643. Segal 1986, 34.

dancers, calling themselves Nymphs, Pans, Sileni and Satyrs, imitate drunken people, while celebrating certain rites of expiation and initiation."[645]

The ambivalent and inbetween status in Greek life of Dionysiac worship becomes apparent as centuries later Greek Christian writers seek to distance themselves from this sort of inbetween place in their effort to transcend the uncertainties of human existence to exist in a more Platonic, godlike state of certainty and perfection. Writing in the 150s CE, Justin attacked Greek religious cults and Dionysus specifically when he said that "we" (i.e. Greek Christians) used to worship Dionysus, but now "although we are threatened with death, through Jesus Christ we have come to despise these immoral deities, and have given ourselves to the unbegotten and impassive god who can not be driven wild by sexual passion, would not need to be rescued, nor would he plan the death of many Greeks for the sake of a concubine. We pity those who believe such stories and we recognize that demons are responsible for them."[646]

Perhaps, but it may be more helpful here to think about the *Bacchae*, as Segal suggests above, in relationship to the fears, disorder, and uncertainty of the historical context of the Peloponnesian War. The importance of this is that human behavior and the linked polarities that he discusses were profoundly altered during this period by a rejection of traditional conceptions of the gods

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644. Price 1999, 115–16, 115 note 19.

645. *Laws* 815c.

646. Justin, *First Apology* 25, tr. Beard, North and Price 1998: 2.12.7a(I). Cf. Chadwick 1996: 9–23; Pagels 1988: 32–56, both from Price 1999, 160. Price also discusses the general incorporation of Dionysiac and Orphic religious motifs into Christian and Jewish theologies.

and thereby of traditional relationships with gods. The view of human limits changed too, as did the understanding of human/divine boundaries.

The alterations are reflected in Herodotus, who wrote about the period before the Peloponnesian War, and Thucydides, who wrote about the war, but afterward. Herodotus, for example, accepted divine interventions in battles and believed truth is learned from oracles.[647] He also implies that Poseidon probably causes earthquakes.[648] Thucydides, however, says he directly tries to reject "mythical" stories.[649] Gods do not intervene in the battles as Thucydides describes them and Price[650] points out that he "puts appeals in the names of gods in the mouths of the losing side in conflicts."[651] He also denies that oracles should be relied on,[652] and describes storms, eclipses, and diseases as having natural causes. When Thucydides describes the disastrous plague that swept through Athens in 430, he says that in the beginning people continued their religious observances, used oracles, and made sacrifices. When the plague continued and the siege was unabated, people in the city stopped their worship, presuming the gods had abandoned them.

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647. Herodotus 8.77. Although the differences between Herodotus and Thucydides are not entirely clear. For example, the Hippocratic claim that even madness has natural causes is echoed in nonmedical literature in, e.g., Xenophon *Memorabilia* 3.12.6, and in Herodotus, who at 3.33 suggests that Cambyses became insane either because he offended Apis or suffered from the sacred disease (epilepsy), which Herodotus says is primarily a bodily condition. Similar suggestions in Herodotus put Cleomenes' mental affliction in the realm of natural cause, 6.75ff. and 84. Also see G.E.R. Lloyd 1979, 29ff., and 1987, 23ff.

648. Herodotus 7.129.

649. Thucydides 1.22.

650. Price 1999, 131.

651. Thucydides 3.58, 5.104–5, 7.77.3–4.

652. Thucydides 2.54.

Thucydides' doubts[653] were paralleled later in Plato when in the *Euthyphro* Socrates asks whether the gods really need gifts. Euthyphro answers by saying they do, as an issue of honor, recognition, and *charis*,[654] but the implication is that Socrates is doubtful. This doesn't mean Plato urged abandoning conventional religious practices because in the *Laws* he includes ritual practices in the ideal state.[655] But all of this was an indication of changes in religious belief and a sense of uncertainty spreading across the region, and the *Bacchae* speaks to that.

Timothy Reiss asserts convincingly that Greek tragedy generally, including the *Bacchae*, arose at a point of crisis in the political, moral, and social discourse about social order:

> In Western history tragedy seems to have appeared at moments that, retrospectively, are marked by a kind of 'hole' in the passage from one dominant discourse to another. . . . Tragedy brings about rationality by showing what can be termed the irrational within that rationality. That is no doubt why all tragedy is thoroughly embroiled in the political, and why to grasp and enclose the tragic, the inexpressible of the discourse being created, is at once an ideological and an anti-ideological activity: the first to the degree that it hides what is unspoken in the law that is the order of discourse, the second, to the extent that it shows it."[656]

Reiss's description has commonalties with the action in the *Bacchae*: The irrational within the rational, an ideological and anti-ideological activity, the passage from one dominant discourse to another, irrational forces that both plague human experience and promise renewal, Segal's city and wild, man and

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653. Thucydides 3.82.

654. *Euthyphro* 12e–15b.

655. Lloyd-Jones 1971, 141, finds these readings of Thucydides unconvincing, noting that "If Thucydides dispenses with the divine motivation of events, that in itself does not show him to have been an unbeliever," nor does it show most people of the period to be unbelievers.

beast, Dionysus as both the respectable god of Athenian civic life and the god of women in a ritualistic frenzy. Where Odysseus in the Odyssey seemed to begin clarifying the relationship between humanity and the divine, seemed to show where the boundaries are drawn, Euripides' *Bacchae* sheds claims for clarity and offers paradox in its stead.

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*j. Genesis*

*Summary*

The first book of the Torah is an account of primeval history extending from the creation of the world and humanity through its near destruction and preservation in the flood to the spread of humanity over the earth. Genesis describes the history of the Judaic lineage of the human family beginning with Abraham, through Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.[657]

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656. Reiss 1980, 284. See especially chapter 12.

657. Except for Orthodox groups, Judaism has generally accepted that much of Torah is a metaphorical rendering. The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, for example, which represents the 1.5 million Conservative Jews in the United States, issued a new Torah and commentary in late 2001, called *Etz Hayim* (Tree of Life in Hebrew), David Lieber, ed., that spells out the unlikeliness of historical accuracy in Torah. One of the essays, by Robert Wexler, president of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, states that on the basis of modern scholarship, it seems unlikely that the story of Genesis originated in Palestine. More likely, it arose in Mesopotamia, the influence of which is most apparent in the story of the Flood, which probably grew out of the periodic overflowing of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Wexler says the story of Noah was probably borrowed from the Mesopotamian epic Gilgamesh. Other essays say archaeological evidence indicates that the Abraham of Genesis may never have existed and that the exodus recounted in the book of Exodus probably did not occur. Reform Judaism issued a Torah in 1981 (Joseph Plaut, ed.) that relates the same doubts about historical accuracy as a result of archaeological evidence. Among Orthodox Jews, however, Torah is regarded as the divine and immutable word of God. Their most widely used Torah commentary, known as the Stone Edition (1993), declares in its introduction "that every letter and word of the Torah was given to Moses by God."

The creation of the world is described as occurring in seven days, perhaps using as material some preexisting undifferentiated chaos. The entrance of evil and suffering into the world is described in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The first signs of cultural development and the scattering of tribes and languages is recounted.

This is a story of divinely established boundaries. The ambiguities inherent to interpretation of the story allow very different understandings. One of the key differences is in whether it is an account of a world under curse that looks forward to Israel as a source of blessing among nations or of a world that is essentially good, guided by God's good providence, or even some combination of the two. It is primarily a theological statement that the world and Israel belong to God, exist because of God's intention, and are called to live under God's guidance. Ultimately, it is the account of a single God, creator of all things, portrayed as juggling the fortunes of people and intending to right the balance of moral justice.

Genesis comprises four movements: the primordial history, the Abraham cycle, the Jacob cycle, and the saga of Joseph and his brothers. Each segment tells the story of how events led to the founding of the people Israel.

The second book of Torah, Exodus, will be mentioned below. The first central element of the story combines an account of the presence of Israel in Egypt, and their liberation from Egyptian bondage. A second central element of the book is an account of Mount Sinai, where God issues his laws. Together, the two elements lead to the binding of Israel and God in a covenant relationship.

*Discussion*

This, the first book of Torah, is an attempt to provide guidance about human action and the limits intrinsic to the universe. But it does so with the full ambiguity of all human endeavor. It both prohibits and allows, both clarifies and clouds. When seen in the confluence of Greek and Hebraic, Genesis gives us an explanation of how we got here, possible causes for suffering, and why there is a need to die. But like the Greek stories, what answers are here lie deeply embedded in layers of complexity that are disguised in the simplicity of the tale.

By the time Aeschylus wrote *The Oresteia* in the early fifth century, the patriarch Abraham is said to have been dead for twelve hundred years, the Exodus was almost eight hundred years in the past, and Solomon's reign had ended more than four hundred years earlier. The earliest form of Genesis is thought to have been composed nearly three thousand years ago by someone scholars call J.[658] Fragments of the unknown author's text include parts of Exodus and Numbers as well as Genesis.

The God of Genesis is the penultimate version of Zeus on Olympus. His authority is absolute. He is the evolutionary endpoint of the developing version of a single God, sharing nothing at all with other deities and demanding that others be shunned. In the *Iliad* Zeus is supreme among the gods,[659] and Lloyd-Jones says that his thought is identical with future happenings, that one's "portion" is

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658. There is no agreement about dating for J's text, or even that it ever had independent existence at all. For discussion about the problems of assigning authorship and dating, see Harold Bloom, 1990, *The Book of J*. David Rosenberg, tr. New York: Grove Weidenfeld; Barry Bandstra, 1999, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, second edition, Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing; Karen Armstrong, 1996, *In the Beginning: A new interpretation of Genesis*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

identical with the will of Zeus." But in Zeus's universe, others also share in the action. Aphrodite is a powerful entity in the Danaid trilogy, Apollo in the Theban trilogy, Athene in the Eumenides. God in Genesis clears away both pretenders and lesser deities. This God faces difficulties with humanity, however, in much the same way Zeus was challenged by human testing of limits. There is no Prometheus vowing to topple this god, but there would be questions about his authority and the boundaries of his dominion.

The initial difficulty in Genesis arises over the serpent's contradicting Eve's understanding of God's instructions, under penalty of death, not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Seductively, the snake says, "Die, you will not die! Rather, God knows that on the day that you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will become like gods, knowing good and evil."[660]

When Adam and Eve succumb to the snake's subversion of God's edict and eat from the tree, God notices:

> Here, the human has become like one of us, in knowing good and evil. So now, lest he send forth his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat and live throughout the ages . . .! So YHWH, God, sent him away from the garden of Eden, to work the soil from which he had been taken. He drove the human out . . .[661]

In a Greek reading, the pair are polluted; in the Judaic, they have sinned; in the Christian, they have fallen. In all three understandings, the story is an account of

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659. *Iliad* 8, 18ff.

660. Genesis 3: 4–5.

661. Genesis 3: 22–24.

how evil and suffering came into the world and suggests the cause was a combination of some mysterious underlying force in the universe, symbolized by the snake, and the willful disobedience by human beings of divine proscription.

The tale has been with us for a very long time and is as fully a part of our moral and metaphysical understanding as anything in the Greek corpus. But it angers some for its implications. Christian philosopher Paul Ricoeur[662] chafes at describing the Eden story as the "keystone of the Judeo-Christian edifice." The doctrine of original sin, he argues, is a "rationalization of the second degree" and a "false column" of Christianity:

> The harm that has been done to souls, during the centuries of Christianity, first by the literal interpretation of the story of Adam, and then by the confusion of this myth, treated as history, with later speculations, principally Augustinian, about original sin, will never be adequately told. In asking the faithful to confess belief in this mythicospeculative mass and to accept it as a self-sufficient explanation, the theologians have unduly required a sacrificium intellectus where what was needed was to awaken believers to a symbolic super-intelligence of their actual condition.[663]

Milton expressed a very different understanding of the story when he wrote *Paradise Lost*. A part of his motivation can be understood by his living in the midst of changes being forced by Bacon, Montaigne, Descartes, and their declarations about the importance of understanding God's creation. They argued that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was now permissibly humanity's to eat. Milton urges caution. His epic presents Adam and Eve as the victims of the envy of Satan, who sees the first humans "Imparadised in one another's arms."[664]

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662. Ricoeur 1967, 239.

663. Ricoeur 1967, 239.

664. *Paradise Lost* IV: 506.

It is Satan, in Milton's account, who whispers in Eve's ear that the proscription on eating from the tree is nonsense, merely the foolish counsel of a limited God who is fearful—like the claimed weakness of Zeus in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*—of humanity's threat to His power. Knowing this, and thinking that the pair may succumb, God sends the Archangel Raphael to remind Adam and Eve that they can freely choose obedience or obedience.[665] During the conversation Adam asks about celestial motion—the Copernican debate—and Raphael says, no, he and Eve are not to know about "things too high."[666]

Milton draws the elements of the dilemma as a grand battle with the epic proportions of the *Iliad*. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit, God as the Son descends to earth to tell them that sin and death will henceforth be a part of life on earth. This then, is the story

> Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world, and all our woe . . .[667]

Adam, like Oedipus in *OC*, protests that the penalty and resultant suffering are unjust, that he was fated by his nature to choose as he did. Again like Oedipus, Adam comes to accept a degree of culpability and enters his exile of suffering and guilt for having violated divine instructions—for having followed Satan in rebellion. Once done, however, Milton suggests that humanity cannot recover from Adam and Eve's choice. It can, however, guard against future transgressions and so Milton's epic takes on the coloration of cautionary tale.

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665. *Paradise Lost* VII.

666. *Paradise Lost* VII: 121.

667. *Paradise Lost* I: 1–3.

When Adam asks for more information, for "secrets," from Raphael because to know more is "the more to magnify his works,"[668] the Angel says some knowledge is "within bounds," but about other knowledge Adam should "abstain to ask, nor let thine own inventions hope things not revealed . . ."[669] Later, Raphael makes it irreducibly clear:

> Heaven is for thee too high
> To know what passes there; be lowly wise:
> Think only what concerns thee and thy being;
> Dream not of other worlds, what creatures there
> Live, in what state, condition, or degree,
> Contented that thus far hath been revealed
> Not of Earth only but of highest Heaven.[670]

Milton suggests, here and elsewhere, that the sin of pride and the lust for knowledge lead to transgressions that will be punished. But he provides for the possibility that humanity's traits of seeking understanding and experience exist for good reason. He seems to admit an ambiguity in the Eden story when Raphael in Book VIII cautions wisdom in the way humanity should proceed with understanding God's creation. Seek understanding of creation, Raphael says, but be cautious of overreaching: "Be lowly wise."[671]

God directly warned Adam and Eve against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, but in Babel or Babylon the proscriptions on investigating the world had not been apparent. Babylonians used the new technology of masonry to build a tall tower, which to God represented their arrogance, their wanting

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668. *Paradise Lost* VII: 94–97.

669. *Paradise Lost* VII: 119–22.

670. *Paradise Lost* VIII: 172–78.

671. *Paradise Lost* VIII: 173.

personal aggrandizement: "Come-now! Let us build ourselves a city and a tower, its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name . . ."[672] they said. God came, and saw, and said:

> Here, (they are) one people with one language for them all, and this is merely the first of their doings—now there will be no barrier for them in all that they scheme to do![673]

Instead of destroying them for their defiance, God divides them, creating many peoples with different customs and languages in His effort to curb their ambitions, their 'schemes.' "Schemes" here is often interpreted as "imagination"[674] and is cited as the dangerous human quality that can cause us to reach too high. With new technologies and united by imagination and a universal language, humanity might be capable of too much, and so they must be restrained. The concern is similar to the one that led God to unleash the great flood: humanity's imagination—'heart's planning'—lured human beings toward overreaching their limits. "Now YHWH saw that great was humankind's evildoing on earth and every form of their heart's planning was only evil all the day."[675]

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672. Genesis 11: 4

673. Genesis 11: 6.

674. The King James translation of Genesis has it: "And now nothing will be restrained from them which they have imagined to do" (11: 6). Also, at 6: 5, just before the flood: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

675. Genesis 6: 5. See above, note 594, on "their heart's planning" translated as their "imagination."

After the flood, Noah persuades God not to destroy humanity a second time, but there follows the same concern about humanity's capacity.[676] Yet here it is ambiguous, with a suggestion that God may be accepting that an intrinsic part of being human is to exercise imagination and seek understanding: ". . . and YHWH said in his heart: I will never curse the soil again on humankind's account, since what the human heart forms is evil from its youth . . ."[677] It seems to me here that if, as has been suggested, "what the human heart forms" refers to those qualities of imagination and curiosity and perhaps others, then God gives up the effort to keep these qualities at bay; it is there from youth, Genesis says, from the beginning, perhaps inescapably.

Increasingly, as the story proceeds, the cause of humanity's "fall," of its "wickedness,"[678] seems to be portrayed as imagination, vision, seeing possibilities, and seeking understanding, all of which threaten to exceed limitations imposed by a transcendent authority. The Tower of Babel episode is an expression of human curiosity bringing punishment, and then as the Genesis story continues, it becomes clear that another aspect of humanity's limits is the prohibition upon looking at God, seeing God, understanding God: "And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is

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676. This story of Noah persuading God not to destroy humanity is paralleled in Prometheus's convincing Zeus not to destroy the race. See above, III.f.

677. Genesis 8: 21. The King James version uses "imagination" in place of "what the human heart forms." See above, notes 594 and 595.

678. The idea of a fall and of wickedness are common understandings of the story, which is why I refer to them, but there is enormous scholarly disagreement about whether humanity in this story moves from a higher to a lower level of being. Many argue that these are Pauline and Augustinian Christian interpretations that ascribe a degradation to the process. An alternative reading is that the Eden story is merely the myth of explanation for why and how humanity is different from God, and that we sometimes suffer because we are not like God.

preserved."[679] Many generations later, during the Exodus, Moses/Moshe twice sees God:[680] "And YHWH would speak to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his neighbor."[681] But God makes clear that this is to be an exception:

> He said, I myself will cause all my Goodliness to pass in front of your face, I will call out the name of YHWH before your face: that I show-favor to whom I show-favor, that I show-mercy to whom I show-mercy. But he said: You cannot see my face, for no human can see me and live![682]

God emphasizes this again a few verses later:

> And it shall be: when my Glory passes by, I will place you in the cleft of the rock and screen you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand; you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.[683]

One of the ways to look at these verses is Dante's suggestion in the *Purgatorio*, that the apple did not give Adam and Eve knowledge of all things, and especially did not reveal knowledge of God. That knowledge, on Dante's account, would be glimpsed later, with Mary's immaculate conception:

> Content you with quia sons of Eve;
> For had you power to see the whole truth plain
> No need had been for Mary to conceive.[684]

Among the reasons we find the stories in Genesis so compelling is that the characters in them are all flawed. They generally have good intentions, but they make mistakes. And, like the Greek gods, the God of Genesis makes mistakes too, especially in His initial expectations of humanity. Genesis is largely an account of

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679. Genesis 32: 30.

680. Exodus 24: 10 and 33: 11.

681. Exodus 33: 11.

682. Exodus 33: 19–20.

683. Exodus 33: 22–23.

684. *Purgatorio* III.37–39.

justice and injustice and the ambiguities that lie in their midst. Why would God punish Adam and Eve for disobeying if they lacked knowledge of good and evil before eating from the tree? Why does God destroy the innocent along with the guilty in the flood and then at Sodom and Gomorrah? Should Abraham be praised for being willing to kill his son? If Abraham could argue with God about what to do in Sodom and Gomorrah, should he not have argued about killing his son? Jacob seems to have been rewarded after cheating his twin brother out of his father's blessing. How can that be? If Cain killed Abel because of petty jealousy over God's preference for Abel's offering, why is Cain's punishment merely to wander about, exiled like Oedipus? Lot offers his daughters to a crowd for their sexual pleasure and then gets an opportunity to escape the destruction of Sodom. Is this justice? Agamemnon received no such mercy from Clytemnestra when he sacrificed their daughter.

When Cain/Kayin is born to Eve/Havva, his mother remarks, pleased, "I-have-gotten a man, as has YHWH!"[685] Eve's prideful claim to creation seems to validate the serpent's seductive promise of God-like powers and sets the stage for what follows. Cain becomes a farmer who becomes jealous of his shepherd brother, Abel/Hevel, when God rejects his sacrifice and accepts Abel's. Cain kills Abel and is condemned by God to wander the earth, but with a protected status from God, who orders that he shall not be harmed. It is a remarkably puzzling tale that includes sibling rivalry, the attraction of sin, the danger of ungoverned passion, the pride of claiming to be like God, crime met with punishment that seems too lenient, God's mercy as well as God's authority and mystery, the

685. Genesis 4: 1. The translation often is "I have created."

futility of pretense, the discontinuity of familial generations, the origins of crafts and of worship, and the moral distinction between civilization and barbarism.

All of these are contained in 16 short, perfectly drawn verses. Their unraveling suggests possible meanings, but like the rest of Genesis it is the process of seeking meaning that may have more value than the claimed solutions. If there is explanation for Cain's punishment, it may be that his uncontrolled anger means he must be separated—morally, economically, and geographically—from the proper realm of civilized life. Cain is exiled from the community to live what is a life of small worth away from other human beings and where he is "concealed"[686] from God's face.[687]

Cain becomes like Oedipus, wandering in exile and suffering for the violent passions and inability to see that again leads to misery and a family cursed. The first child in Genesis repeats the fate of Milton's Lucifer,[688] who is exiled, hidden from God. The Islamic rendering of the Satan story is that the angel so loved God he became jealous of humanity's favor in God's eyes and rebelled. His exile meant perpetual suffering because he would be away from his beloved. Over and over, stories are told of how angelic powers or other important figures get swollen with lust or with arrogance, and must be exiled either from heaven or from God's presence or from the civilization that symbolizes whatever is thought to be the best and most appropriate place for

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686. Genesis 4: 14.

687. This interpretation is Ronald Hendel's in Metzger and Coogan 1993, 97.

688. Milton's use of the Latin name "Lucifer," which means "light-bearer," according to Pagels 1995 (48), suggests parallel connections to Promethean rebellion.

human life.[689] When Cain became jealous of Abel, the story parallels an apocryphal version of angelic rebellion in which Satan refuses God's order that the angels bow down to Adam and is banished for his jealousy and disobedience.[690]

A traditional Jewish truism is that there are seventy faces to the Torah, and so no single interpretation is objectively correct.[691] In the Cain story, like the story of the binding of Isaac,[692] like Oedipus, we mine the words for knowledge of God and of ourselves and we find no certainty. The value of Genesis is its continuing relevance in seeking understanding about the provenance of justice and the meaning of suffering. The answers we find are ambiguous, but they allow us at least to see that it might be in the existence of universal questions, rather than in the clarity of the answers, that the commonality of experience most clearly appears.

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689. For the various renderings of Satan or Lucifer, see Pagels 1995, especially 39–55.

690. Pagels 1995, 49.

691. Leibowitz 1999, xxxii.

692. Genesis 22.

## Chapter IV: The changing moral image

### *a. Ancient and modern images*

As I write this, the corpses of the butchered and the brutalized lie scattered across the landscapes of Israel, Kosovo, and Bosnia. The dead and the soon-to-be dead are hiding in caves and behind the walls of misbegotten shelter in Afghan villages. Neither they nor the charred, fragmented souls that haunt New York are afforded protection from the fear and hatred and stupidities of each new Creon who wanders unknowingly into power. In 1984 George Steiner composed a lyrical study of the *Antigone* that foreshadowed subsequent decades of grinding, tedious of savagery.

He said Teiresias's vision of the inversion of the worlds of the living and of the dead has taken on for us, today, an overwhelming actuality: "It is the lucid delineation of a planet on which massacres . . . have left the numberless unburied dead, and in whose subterranean shelters, caves, or conscripted catacombs the living wait in blackness for their end."[693]

What Teiresias points to, Steiner said, is the prospect for humanity of the "murder of life itself by the politics of the living, politics which, like Creon's, have their undoubted claims to dignity and to rationality." Steiner's words describe the puzzlement of a world in which each new Creon seems able to assure us that the vulgarity of human slaughter is necessary and sensible. He argues that ancient Athenians who listened to Sophocles' words had questions about their government and their gods not dissimilar from those we have. The relevance of

Teiresias's words "negates all cautionary distance between us and the ancient text," he says, and in our recognition of Creon's pollution, the words scream to us across more than two thousand years, bringing an image of darkness.[694]

Less than a decade after Steiner wrote, *Newsweek* magazine reported that Serbia's genocide of Muslims in Bosnia had included systematic slaughter of civilians and a policy of psychological terrorism that included mass rape: "Rape is an integral part of ethnic cleansing, of eradicating entire areas of their historic Muslim populations through brutal intimidation, expulsion and outright murder."[695] *Newsweek* reported that the corpses lay scattered along roadsides and in charred remains of burned-out homes.

Steiner says that in the ancient stories are "the raw material and substance of the continuities of the human psyche" and that this is the reason, "More and more, we can come to understand in the modernist movements in the West a hunger for 'beginnings', for a return to archaic, essentially Greek, sources." This "will to homecoming," to the fusion of past and present, is vividly represented in the tragic politics of our age: "The burning of cities in 1939–45 was seen, almost at once, as cognate with the destruction of Troy." Later, for Sartre and the Living Theatre, during the wars in Algeria and Vietnam, such figures as Andromache, Hecuba, and the Trojan women provided, Steiner asserts, "a code of universal

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693. Steiner 1984, 288.

694. Steiner 1984, 288.

695. *Newsweek*, January 4, 1994, 32–37.

presentness" because they foreshadow, they symbolize, they speak nakedly to our present condition.[696]

The stories I have discussed have long been a source of understanding, solace, mystery, and anxiety in what they say about the playing out of human lives in relationship with each other and with the divine. When Teiresias tells Creon that the Erinyes, the Furies, are "lying in ambush for you,"[697] implicit in this and in the context of what he says are questions about whether the gods are the source of destiny, whether they are at work in human action, and whether human beings in some way have effect on Olympus. These and other questions resonate in us because the stories, as Steiner explains, have an "unbroken authority . . . over the imagination of the West" so that there seems to be an unending obsession with Oedipus, Prometheus, Orestes, Narcissus.[698] Our identification with these myths is so immediate and fertile that they are the constant "pivot of reference for all subsequent poetic invention and philosophic allegory."

If Steiner has got it right, and I think he has, then embedded in these stories we should be able to find the elements of our deepest concerns, our most important values, and our understanding of meaning in human life. We should be able to find these because over the period of 2800 or so years Western consciousness developed always with that "pivot of reference" to the Greek, and so the seeds of our values today should still be recognizable in Sophocles,

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696. Steiner 1984, 284–85.

697. *Antigone* 1075.

698. Steiner 1984, 300.

Aeschylus, and the other dramatists. The existence of Steiner's "continuities of the human psyche" argues strongly for a reading of the continuum that says that when we find elements that are constant, or nearly so, there we will find a picture of what we value about being human.

The picture should show what helps us thrive rather than suffer and wither. With that knowledge, we can more fruitfully think about how we want our lives to proceed and the kind of human community we want to create. In the unfolding of the cultural continuum, we can also identify directions we may wish to avoid. I have cautioned before that the stories do not provide clear answers to current dilemmas. But if we look carefully and consider well, I believe they can show us the most elemental of the values we cherish. If we find the elemental values in these ancient stories, and can recognize them in modern counterparts, we can presume from this that their persistence is something we ought attend.

Among the difficulties, of course, is in the interpretation of myths and stories. Certainty in interpretation is elusive, and it might be argued that one reading is as good as another. Bowra finds in *Oedipus* a straightforward cautionary tale showing that Oedipus is guilty of crimes abhorrent to humanity and gods. On his account, the lesson is that life is precarious and so care must be taken to honor moral laws.[699] Others argue that, no, Oedipus is an account of luck entering into human life, skewing the outcome of men's action so that destiny is not just unpredictable, it is sometimes comic.[700] Dodds and Winnington-Ingram[701]

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699. Bowra 1944, 220–21.

700. Nussbaum 1986, 283, 334, 380, 383.

701. Dodds 1966, 37–49; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 211.

disagree with Bowra, arguing that Oedipus is morally and legally innocent, and his punishment violates human understanding of justice. Quine argues against all of them that sentences and texts lack determinate meaning, and looking for such is pointless. He claims there is no "fact of the matter" as to which meaning is the right one.[702]

But while I might agree that texts such as the stories I discuss lack absoluteness in their meaning, I do not agree that there are not better and worse interpretations. Putnam argues against Chomsky's contention about total subjectivism and that all interests must be taken to be on a par.[703] No, "There are silly interests, deluded interests, irrational interests, and so on, as well as reasonable and relevant ones (even if there is no general rule for determining which are which)."[704]

Putnam similarly argues against Quine and Chomsky that a "sane relativism" recognizes that there is a "fact of the matter in interpretation without making that fact of the matter unique or context-independent."[705] In literature, whether it is *King Lear* or Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* interpretations vary, as do assumptions and styles of criticism in different periods. But while an absolutely correct interpretation is a troublesome notion, it is just as troublesome to make the radical claim that interpretation is simply invented anew by each interpreter.

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702. Quine 1960, 11ff. Also see Quine and Ullian 1978.

703. Chomsky 1980 (from Putnam 1990, 211).

704. Putnam 1990, 211.

705. Putnam 1990, 211.

Putnam argues, correctly I think, that this latter possibility falls in the same category as other self-refuting relativisms.

Keeping in mind the difficulties of commensurability, it is still possible on Putnam's account to follow Quine's suggestion to think of interpretation as correlation, which means, for example, that we can correlate Aristotle's words and sentences with words and sentences in our present-day language and in so doing we can begin to find connections, though not sameness. "Sameness" is not possible because Aristotle's words depended on contexts—institutions, assumptions, and so forth—that no longer exist.

Each period requires new interpretations, Putnam says, and we thus give up the idea of Platonic "meaning."[706] Instead, we can think of interpretation as human interaction seeking to find what Putnam calls the *"implications"* of what Aristotle wrote. Because what is written is often, perhaps always, ambiguous, we try, in translating to our age, to find out what it might imply about our problems. Against Posner,[707] I think writers are trying to tell us something, and what that might be can and should be much more than the truth conditions of the words and sentences. Putnam says there can be no "final commentary, one that is perfect from the standpoint of every cultural position, every set of interests and assumptions."[708] But to say there is no one unalterably true interpretation is not to find that contemporary understandings do not take account of commonalities in human experience that extend over time. "Perhaps," Putnam says, "we can

706. Putnam 1990, 211.

707. See above, section 2.

708. Putnam 1990, 212.

come to see criticism as a conversation with many voices rather than as a contest with winners and losers."[709]

Better and worse interpretations might be claimed on the basis of Putnam's "moral image." This "moral image" presumes that it is not the case that all there is is language, that what we perceive in the moral realm exists only in whatever way we describe it at any point in time. It is possible on this account to renounce notions of "things in themselves"—although not as, with Kant, because we cannot know the things in themselves—and yet still speak of conceptual schemes in which our descriptions, following Putnam, "reflect our interests and choices."[710]

Putnam explains the way a moral image fits into his scheme of internal realism in moral philosophy by asserting that finding a moral image is what Kant is doing in his project of arguing for the third formulation of the Categorical Imperative—that is, for the proper ordering of the formal and material principles of morality, and so on. Putnam says Kant is

> . . . most importantly, providing a moral image of the world which *inspires* these, and without which they don't make sense. A moral image, in the sense in which I am using the term, is not a declaration that this or that is a virtue, or that this or that is what one ought to do; it is rather a picture of how our virtues and ideals hang together with one another and of what they have to do with the position we are in.[711]

An example of aspects of moral image might be as vague as "sisterhood and brotherhood." Millions of human beings find in these metaphors moral images

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709. Putnam 1990, 213.

710. Putnam 1987, 37.

711. Putnam 1987, 51.

that can organize their moral lives, Putnam says, "and this notwithstanding the enormous problem of interpreting them and of deciding what it could possibly mean to make them *effective*.[712]

Where most moral philosophers talk about duties, rights, virtues, and the rest, Putnam says Kant was right to think about moral images, and Kant's most important contribution was to see that we cannot separate our conceptual contribution from what might on the account of a medievalist metaphysics be described as what is "objectively there." This inability is a good thing, Putnam says. Kant's project in this is, following Putnam, in accord with Jurgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, who claim that the "notion of a warranted or justified statement involves an implicit reference to a community."[713] Putnam says one way to see the importance of moral image is to see what happens when we try to justify a fundamental social institution such as democracy without appealing to an image of human nature.

Kant presents one facet of moral image for the West, which stresses the liberal values of free and critical thinking, but it is not the only facet. Judaism and Christianity offer others, stressing equality, among other things. Because there are a variety of facets that must go into moral image, many of which shade into and out of each other in seen and unseen ways, Kant's moral philosophy is

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712. Putnam 1987, 51.

713. Putnam 1987, 53. Habermas expresses this position in *Knowledge and Human Interests,* 1971, translated by Jeremy Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press. Apel's position is in Charles S. Peirce, *From Pragmatism to Pragmaticism,* 1981, translated by John Michael Krois. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

defective, Putnam argues, because Kant does not want to supplement the moral image, he wants to replace it completely, with a "monistic moral standpoint."[714]

Putnam at times argues for the existence of many moral images, saying that rather than being different facets of one image, the West is comprised of various images: "We have many different moral images in our tradition, and there are moral images which we need to pay attention to in other traditions as well."[715] But he usually refers to needing "a more multi-faceted moral image," and he seems to have the same idea in mind with both descriptions. When Putnam refers to moral image or facet, he does not mean some one trait or "some one mode of behavior as virtuous." In describing the Kantian moral image, for example, he includes thinking for oneself about how to live and say, "it includes the claim that a human being who has chosen not to think for himself about how to live, or has been coerced or 'conditioned' into being unable to think for himself about how to live, has failed to live a fully human life." The moral image also contains the idea of a community of individuals who respect each other for that capacity, as well as ideas about how a community should be organized, and so forth. It includes a complex system of values that serve to support the community.

Steiner speaks to certain of these values when he discusses the role of *Antigone* in our imaginations; he says it is "a defining trait" of the Western moral image:

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714. Putnam 1987, 61.

715. Putnam 1987, 61.

> . . . pervasive, and altogether impossible to index has been the role of the matter of Antigone in the actual lives of individuals and communities. It is a defining trait of western culture after Jerusalem and after Athens that in it men and women re-enact, more or less consciously, the major gestures, the exemplary symbolic motions, set before them by antique imaginings and formulations. Our realities, as it were, mime the canonic possibilities first expressed in classical art and feeling. In his diary for 17 September 1941, the German novelist and publicist Martin Raschke recounts an episode in Nazi-occupied Riga. Caught trying to sprinkle earth on the publicly exposed body of her executed brother, a young girl, entirely unpolitical in her sentiments, is asked why. She answers: 'He was my brother. For me that is sufficient.' In December 1943, the Germans descended on the village of Kalavrita in the Peloponnesus. They rounded up all the males and did them to death. Against explicit orders, in peril of their own lives the women of the village broke out of the school in which they had been imprisoned and went *en massse* to lament and to bury the slain. . . .[716]

The girl who tried to sprinkle earth on the exposed body of her brother may or may not have known the story of Antigone. But the story is in the culture's blood in a thousand different ways and so she acts from cultural knowledge even if she does not know *Antigone*. The trait also shows up in humbler circumstances, Steiner asserts—"in the spasms of the young when faced with the unctuous imperative of the old, in the daily rub of Utopian or anarchic impulse against the mildewed surface of 'realism' and expedient routine . . ." Since the fifth century, he says, the West has experienced "decisive moments of its identity and history in reference to the Antigone legend and to the life in art and in argument of this legend. Overwhelmingly, it has felt women in the face of arbitrary power and of death to be, as Romain Rolland called them in his desperate plea for an armistice and a burial of the dead during the hecatombs of 1914–18, 'the Antigones of the earth.'[717]

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716. Steiner 1984, 108–09

717. Steiner 1984, 109

What Steiner means by claiming that our realities mime the possibilities expressed in classical art is related to what C. S. Lewis argued when he said traditional wisdom is passed on in religion and literature by manifesting abiding moral truths.[718] Lewis, however, asserts that religion and literature are the means by which moral insights are transmitted, which goes beyond the mere 'miming' of truths. In the context, I think this is what Steiner meant as well, because he argues in very clear terms in this essay and elsewhere that classical literature strongly and directly influences our moral, philosophical, and aesthetic sensibilities. Greek mythology, for example, is the "constant centre or pivot of reference for all subsequent poetic invention and philosophic allegory."[719] He says we "come home" to the stories as "our psychic roots."[720] As an example, he recalls a teacher of Green from high school who during the Second World War would "knit Sophocles' text to the news of war and of occupation, of hostages and the unburied dead . . ."[721] Similarly, Sidney Callahan asserts that the truths found in religion and literature are "foundational moral axioms, which recur and persist in human thinking because they correspond to universally objective moral reality. . . . Those societies that stray from the traditional wisdom will pay a heavy price." It would seem an act of hubris, she adds, "not to appreciate the guidance and authoritative voice inherent in the common moral traditions of the past."[722]

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718. Lewis 1947/1978, 39–53.

719. Steiner 1984, 301.

720. Steiner 1984, 301.

721. Steiner 1984, 292–93.

722. Callahan 1991, 6

Yet, each new generation unavoidably seeks to both honor the wisdom of the past and still find its own way in some of these matters. They strike out in what they believe are new directions, claiming new conclusions, reinterpreting key points, and often asserting that their findings negate the claims of the previous generation. We sometimes seem to find this in Plato. In the *Apology*,[723] for example, he has Socrates deny the authority of fate when they argue that the gods guarantee that nothing can destroy the happiness of a truly good person. Socrates either sets aside previous understandings or seeks to correct errors in moral thinking when he asserts that the best course is to "refuse to accept Homer's or any other poet's mistake concerning the gods when they err without understanding and say that 'two urns stand on Zeus's threshold / filled with fates, one with good, the other miserable.'"[724] The reference to the *Iliad*[725] is to the claim that mortals who receive allotments from both urns are sometimes happy, sometimes not; those who receive solely from the urn of unhappiness live in misery.

For the Socratics, this left too much to chance, too much out of the control of the man who properly employed philosophical study. Bernard Williams suggests that Plato might have overstated the case in the *Apology* and that it was not so much that he did not see the power of fortune to "wreck what looked like the best-shaped life." Rather, he "sought a rational design of life which would

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723. *Apology* 41 c–d.

724. *Republic* II.

725. *Iliad* 24.527–33.

reduce the power of fortune and would be to the greatest possible extent luck-free."[726]

Williams is one of this generation's philosophers who employ ancient understandings to guide their own search. While he too finds in the past much to set aside about the application of fundamental principles, partly because "we exist now and not in Socrates' condition,"[727] he nevertheless argues that "It would be silly to forget that many acute and reflective people have already labored at formulating and discussing these questions."[728] Williams asserts here not that the fundamentals have significantly altered, but that their application to particular circumstances may need to be changed, partly because circumstances have changed.

He takes as the starting point, Socrates' question, "How should one live?"[729] and employs the ancient dramas, Plato, Aristotle, and others in looking for ways to think about this. He begins by inquiring—following the model of Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, and the rest—into the nature of justice.[730] When Plato considered justice, Williams says, he saw that the common view was that it is merely "an instrument for the satisfaction of selfish desires that exist naturally, independent of any ethical outlook." Justice in this sense is something one would not want to follow if one did not need to and, for Plato, this was a

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726. Williams 1985, 5.

727. Williams 1985, 2.

728. Williams 1985, 2.

729. *Republic* 352d.

730. See especially in relationship to Aristotle's Book 5, *Nicomachean Ethics*; also in Williams 1981, 83–93.

basic weakness.[731] He thought an account of the ethical life could combat skepticism "only if it showed that it was rational for people to be just, whoever they were and whatever their circumstances."[732]

From this Socratic beginning, Williams's project encompassed a series of studies in which he sought, among other things, places of commonality in human experience through time that provide glimpses into the nature of justice and moral obligation.[733] He found a tension existing between ancient and modern inquiries in how they frame their questions and interests. But in some basic respects, he says, "the philosophical thought of the ancient world was better off, and asked more fruitful questions . . . (because) it was typically less obsessional than modern philosophy, less determined to impose rationality through reductive theory."[734] Still, he admits that the world is irreversibly different, and so rather than limit our inquiry to the way interests take shape only in ancient philosophers, it is more productive to begin with them, and then employ their reflections along with those of medieval, modern, and postmodern thought to find places where human experience has commonality—thicknesses of experience, as he puts it.

In assertions similar to Putnam's, Williams says this does not mean that moral philosophy need seek "to join the natural sciences in providing an absolute conception of the world, but we need to have some reflective social knowledge,

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731. Williams 1985, 31.

732. Williams 1985, 31.

733. In addition to the discussion of this project in Williams 1985, he discusses this in Williams 1981, 1993, and 1995.

734. Williams 1985, 197.

including history, that can command unprejudiced assent if the better hopes for our self-understanding are to be realized."[735]

The reflective knowledge he desires is not a claim to foundations in determinate conceptions of well-being, nor to showing the "truth" of ethical statements. Neither does he reject Isaiah Berlin's insistence that there is a plurality of values which can conflict with one another, and which are not reducible to one another.[736] Rather, he seeks some way to justify a "disposition to accept certain ethical statements"[737] and it is in the commonality of experience he believes we can find clues to this. In this project, "It is no paradox," he asserts, "that in these very new circumstances very old philosophies may have more to offer than moderately new ones" in efforts to justify, for example, a "respect for freedom and social justice and a critique of oppressive and deceitful institutions. . . ."[738]

In those efforts, what will make a difference "is the extent to which ethical life can still rely on what I have called thick ethical concepts," such as "*treachery* and *promise* and *brutality* and *courage*, . . ."[739] While these are open to "being unseated by reflection, . . . to the extent that they survive it, a practice that uses them is more stable in face of the general, structural reflections about the truth of ethical judgments than a practice that does not use them." He claims for these judgments that when they employ thick ethical concepts they are

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735. Williams 1985, 199.

736. Williams 1981, 71.

737. Williams 1985, 199.

738. Williams 1985, 198.

"straightforwardly true" and "for the people who have these concepts, the claim involved in assenting to them can correspondingly be honored."

By "the people who have these concepts," he means those are in the Western lineage beginning with the Greeks, finding confluence with the Judaic, and ending with us, today. Williams's substantive or thick ethical concepts, which he says include "*coward, lie, brutality, gratitude,* and so forth," are characteristically related to reasons for action.[740] Being action-guiding, the concepts are applied in the context of a world and by people who may agree or not that it applies to some situation.

In *Shame and Necessity,* Williams stresses some "unacknowledged similarities" between Greek conceptions and our own,[741] especially concepts used in interpreting our own and other people's feelings and actions: ideas of responsible action, justice, and the motivations that lead people to do things that are admired and respected. The problem on Williams's account is that we do not understand the parts of our conceptions that originate in the Greek. We have some clues about it, but mostly we merely frame them in what he describes as the "progressivist" account of moral progress in the ancient world.

Without endorsing it, Williams frames the progressivist account in this way:[742] Greeks had primitive ideas of action, responsibility, ethical motivation, and justice, which in the course of history have been replaced by a more complex

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739. Williams 1985, 129.

740. Williams 1985, 140.

741. Williams 1993, 2.

742. Williams 1993, 5.

and refined set of conceptions that define a more mature form of ethical experience. Further, the world of Homer is thought to have embodied a shame culture[743] and that shame was later replaced, in its crucial ethical role, by guilt. Some think that this process had gone a long way by the time of Plato or even the tragedians. Others see all Greek culture as governed by notions that are nearer to shame than to a full notion of moral guilt, with its implications of freedom and autonomy; they believe that moral guilt was attained only by the modern consciousness. Dodds held the former view; the latter is dominant in Adkins.[744] Lloyd-Jones[745] warns that little can be educed about any of this.

Williams argues against all of them that there has not "been as big a shift in underlying conceptions as the progressivists suppose."[746] How much of a shift there has or has not been is, he admits, an elusive question that cannot be fully answered because to do so would be to be able clearly to distinguish between what we think and what we merely think that we think. Instead, Williams argues that if we can come to understand the ethical concepts of the Greeks, "we shall recognise them in ourselves" and that the recognition will occur partly, but not entirely, at the level of basic human motives.

Most importantly, if I understand him, Williams suggests that what we might be able to get from understanding the Greeks is a coherent set of opinions "about the ways in which power should be exercised in modern societies, with

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743. See Dodds 1951.

744. Adkins 1960.

745. Lloyd-Jones 1971.

746. Williams 1993, 7.

what limitations and to what ends."[747] If this is possible, it would help immensely in the project not just of devising a proper civic system, but also in making decisions that lead to that kind of system. This would include decisions about health care and about the appropriate uses of medical technologies.

Further, where Williams claims that our ideas of action and responsibility and other of our ethical concepts are closer to those of the ancient Greeks than we usually suppose, he seems to make much easier my project of arguing that Greek epics and tragedies provide the Western paradigm for thinking about conduct and obligation. But he also says there are problems, partly in that his thesis makes claims that sometimes seem contradictory. For example, he wants to say, in addition to the claim that ethical concepts are closer to those of the Greeks than we suppose, that (1) the significance of those Greek ideas is expressed in ancient tragedy and is central to its effect; (2) tragedy must be understood as a particular historical development, coming about at a particular time; (3) tragedy tells us something about our ideas of human agency, responsibility, regret, and necessity, among others; and (4), this historical development involved beliefs about the supernatural, the human, and the daimonic, which we could not possibly accept, which are no part of our world.[748]

"How can we respond to (the tragedies)," Williams asks, "if their effect is grounded essentially in supernatural conceptions that lie over two thousand years behind us?" He answers: "The fact that we can honestly and not just as tourists respond to the tragedies is almost enough in itself to show that ethically

747. Williams 1993, 11.

we have more in common with the audience of the tragedies than the progressivist story allows."[749] But "almost enough" is not necessarily sufficient, and the largest hurdle is that in areas of causation and necessity, the tragedies involve supernatural conceptions that are conceptually very far away from modern or postmodern understandings. The solution may be in looking for analogies in our experience and the way we see the world

Williams says that his project is in a sense based upon the necessary truth of "the primacy of the individual and of personal dispositions" but that this necessity may end with "drastic technological changes such as cloning, pooling of brainstores, and so on."[750] Despite the difficulties these may bring to our common concepts, Williams says he has an optimistic belief in the continuing possibility of a "meaningful individual life, one that does not reject society, and indeed shares its perceptions with other people to a considerable depth, but it is enough unlike others, in its opacities and disorder as well as in its reasoned intentions, to make it *somebody's*."[751]

Putnam and Williams acknowledge the difficulty of finding understanding, but as I suggested earlier, if we look carefully and consider well, we will find in the unfolding of the cultural continuum the most elemental of the values we cherish. Their persistence is something we ought attend.

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748. Williams 1993, 16–17.

749. Williams 1993, 18.

750. Williams 1985, 201.

751. Williams 1985, 201–02.

*b. Seeing*

The values that recur in these stories have to do with family, limits of human reach, the prohibited realm of divinity, appropriate action, human motivation, and divine intention. They make claims about our obligations to the dead and to the living, and about the value of each. They warn about honoring limitations on knowledge and the hubris of our pursuits. Warnings in the stories are paralleled in philosophical and theological understandings. Maimonides and Aquinas,[752] for example, both warn against the same dangers: the hubris that exists in our inquiries and in our dogmas. They say we must understand the limits of reason so that we can get knowledge of God's providence. The story of Job is cited by both as a study of human freedom as well as the story of a man who experiences the failure of natural reason to recognize its limits.[753]

Several questions reside in the space between Oppenheimer's seeing the potential for disaster in the product of his work and Walter Gilbert's 1986 claim that the Human Genome Project[754] "is the grail of human genetics . . . the ultimate answer to the commandment, 'Know thyself.'"[755] One of them has to do with whether ultimate answers are possible and whether we will ever reach the conclusion of Percival in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* that the grail will be found only with the application of enough humility.

752. Maimonides 1963, Aquinas 1969.

753. Dobbs-Weinstein 1995 examines these issues in Maimonides and Aquinas.

754. Hereafter, HGP.

755. Walter Gilbert, in a speech delivered in 1986 at a U.S. Department of Energy meeting in Santa Fe, N.M., organized to consider whether to extend sequencing to all of our 3 million base pairs. Cited in Shattuck 1996, 237.

Other questions have to do with how we will think about and what we will do with the new technologies, abilities, and knowledge coming from the genome project and other inquiries. We are not sure yet the extent of their possibilities, but the questions are building. We do not know how individuals will benefit from promised therapies, including gene replacement. Prenatal and carrier testing is raising a variety of ethical and social questions. The implications for increased numbers of abortions has raised alarms. Knowledge arising from the HGP has the possibility already of being compromised because many of the scientists involved are involved in commercial projects to turn their findings into cash. A corpus of theoretical law is being developed having to do with the new question of wrongful life and birth. Will this mean that prenatal tests that can distinguish single-gene inherited and incurable conditions should be used to screen the entire population? If so, what will we do with the results? Is there reason to be concerned about unpredictable and irreparable damage to the evolutionary process? A New York Times editorial twenty years ago, on July 22, 1982, asked whether we should think about making "perfect humans," and recommended that there be no interference with germ-cell alterations, saying "There is no discernible line to be drawn between making inheritable repairs and improving the species."[756]

The concerns are mitigated by the promise of therapies for cruel diseases and an unfairly early death. The assumption is that common sense will keep the possibilities from leading us in the direction of science fiction horrors, or toward the narrator's fear in *Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground* about humanity

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756. "Making Perfect Humans," *New York Times* July 22, 1982.

becoming a mechanistic cog in the utopian Crystal Palace of scientific determinism. But we are unsure; we fret. If cats and sheep can be cloned, surely we will clone human beings, and what will that mean? What will we do with the ability? Is the entire endeavor merely another reaching toward the grail of immortality?

I have claimed that we can find in the stories I have discussed the seeds of values we employ in considering issues that arise today. I further claimed that where we find a continuity of values, we can profitably use them in discussions of issues related to emerging technologies such as cloning and genetic therapies or manipulations.

The values I claim together form some of the elements of Putnam's moral image of ourselves, and as such tell us a good bit about what we value in ourselves, what we would like to be different, and what we are unsure about. In the stories generally is the implicit value that we are a part of a larger whole of some constitution—either communally in a civic system or divinely in a perhaps providential system,[757] or some variation on these. In this larger whole, we have certain obligations of behavior. Many of the following observations fall within the provenance of this sense of being a part of something.

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757. The prospect of a benevolent and purposeful ordering not always perceptible to humanity recurs in ancient writers beginning with Plato (*Timaeus* 30b, 44c) and Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.4.6, 4.3.6), and then Diogenes Laertius (3.24k) and Plutarch (*Moralia* 425f, 436d). The thesis appears in Genesis when Abraham is told "I will make a great nation of you and will give-you-blessing and will make your name great. . . . All the clans of the soil will find blessing through you!" (Genesis 12.2–3). It became, of course, a foundational concern beginning with first-century writers such as Philo, who wrote in *Pronoia* that a person should be able to ascertain God's plan. Christian writers developed a clear articulation of the idea in claims such as that in a speech attributed to Peter, asserting that Jesus came "by the predestined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2.23). All of this may or may not involve fatalism or determinism, depending on the way the argument is drawn.

• Adam and Eve along with Prometheus and related symbols point to a nearly unquenchable desire to learn about the universe and whether there are external limits to proper inquiry.

• Two possibilities emerge about limits: that they are self-imposed or that they are imposed by some underlying universal force or law, or some combination of these.

• That we value knowledge and experience does not mean we would value eternal life. When Odysseus declined Calypso's offer of immortality, he made the argument that other qualitative values override the quantitative value of more life.

• The lack of interest in immortality is related to a trepidation at what Mary Douglas describes as crossing categories. We are averse to making such significant changes in the nature of being human that it would lead us to become something else. The experience of procreation, for example, could lead to significant changes if the process becomes a manufacturing rather than a begetting experience.

• Similarly, there are limitations to what alterations could be made in the structure of the human body before the alterations create a different kind of being. Epictetus suggests these limitations in the story of the athlete. The *Bacchae* and the *Medea* raise questions about human beings taking on bestial characteristics and thereby altering their essential humanity.

• Prometheus, Dionysus, the serpent in Genesis, and other elements remind us that there are competing values, including that there are no limits to what we are able to do, that human beings have radical freedom in the way they

construct themselves and their experience of the world. A tension exists between the Promethean and the contrary values that express limits.

• Despite curiosity, the experiences of Oedipus and others suggest an acceptance that whatever values and intentions the gods have, humanity may not have access to understanding them.

• Pity should be shown to those who suffer. Achilleus's pity for Troy's king Priam keeps his anger in check. The Greek choruses say pity should be felt for Antigone, Oedipus, and others who suffer, especially if they suffer beyond their fair allotment.

• Friendship, relationship, and communal experience is necessary to human well-being. The exiles of Cain and Oedipus were severe punishments because they were deprived of human company. Cain had the added misery of being apart from God. Betrayal is thus a severe violation of a value because it destroys relationship.

• Social customs should be honored unless the honoring of them violates some larger value. When Agamemnon refused Chryses' offer to pay the appropriate ransom for his daughter's freedom, the Greek commander behaved improperly and endangered the community.

• Pride is dangerous. Agamemnon's taking Briseis from Achilleus to show "how much greater I am than you" was a link in the chain of disaster Agamemnon brought on himself.

• Some things bring both value and disvalue, the proportions depending upon seeing limits. In Genesis, the limits were transgressed when new technologies were misused in Babylon.[758]

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758. Genesis 11: 4–6.

• Some inquiries into the workings of the natural world may transgress divine providence, threatening to alter God's intention. Milton warned about this. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* also warns about overreaching in scientific inquiry.

• Human beings' lives may be affected by a variety of forces, including gods, fate, luck, insanity, and our own actions and intentions. Achilleus in the *Iliad* points to these issues. Acting with moderation is the value that can allay some of the effects of these forces.

• We value being well-regarded by others. It appears as a continuing value in Homer and every other story.

• Justice occurs on two levels. Human justice should be fair, and equitably distributed. Odysseus's killing his wife's suitors was a necessary part of bringing order, or justice. Ultimate justice is often unfathomable. *The Oresteia*, Hesiod's poems, *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, and the Homeric epics all speak to this. The tension between the two is especially evident in Plato's assertion that the good is independent of what humans think, want, or do. In the *Phaedo* (73–7), *Phaedrus* (249), *Republic* (7: 514–18), and elsewhere, Plato claims that the Good is what human beings seek, but that it eludes our grasp because we see only an imperfect conception of the Good that exists in its perfected form only in in the realm of Forms. On his account the Good in our experience always imitates and thus falls short of the Form of Goodness. Justice may or may not have a moral component, such that in Hesiod and Homer there is disagreement about whether *dike*, (roughly, justice) had a moral component, though it certainly did in most of the poetry of the fifth century and later..

• Citizenship as a value is related to justice, in that it is giving what is owed. It is also valued for its role in the well-being of the community. Odysseus demonstrates this, as does Hesiod's poems and *The Oresteia*.

• Suffering and disaster often result from overreaching boundaries. Our inability to see those boundaries will not necessarily mitigate the suffering, which Oedipus learned, as did Creon, and Job.

• Suffering may or may not be commensurate with the violation. Antigone suffered for demanding that Creon honor divine laws. Oedipus merely failed to see properly, and suffered enormously.

• The obligations that accrue from familial connection generally prevail over other obligations. When Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, he believed it was necessary for the good of the city. Aeschylus suggests he did not think clearly, then and elsewhere. The *Bacchae* depicts family disconnection as parallel to a city's disintegration. Odysseus's determination to return to his wife is depicted as an admirable characteristic.

• There are customs and perhaps divine laws that stipulate the proper treatment of the dead. In the *Iliad, Antigone,* and the *Bacchae,* violations of these create feelings of repugnance. Violence to corpses is forbidden at all levels, human and divine.

• The experience of Eve's sons, Cain and Abel, suggest that her claiming god-like powers of creation began a cautionary tale. The juxtaposition in Genesis of being banished for transgressing god's proscription, then claiming god-like powers of creation, followed by the fruits of that power being killed and exiled, suggests that the tellers of the story were suggesting a connection. Prometheus offers a similar lesson in his violation of divine boundaries and his subsequent punishment. Both Prometheus and Cain challenge god's dominion—Cain by being angry that god favored his brother's sacrifice; Prometheus by arguing that Zeus is subject to another, stronger power.

• Identity is an inextricable combination of body, mind, custom, experience, and a variety of relationships—with family, community, gods, and so forth. When the political and economic relationships began altering in Hesiod's time, beliefs about value altered.

• Human beings have intrinsic value. This shows up over and over, especially in those places where killing of a human being, intentional or not, brings pollution and the expectation of punishment. *Oedipus*, *The Oresteia*, and Genesis contain examples.[759]

In each of these values is embedded the essential struggle of learning, understanding, seeing. Being able to contain the possibilities of imagination and desire is spoken of in the stories as having the ability to 'see.' In *Oedipus*, the Sophoclean hero seems to be punished at least partly for seeing what is forbidden, or perhaps for not seeing what he should have seen. But Oedipus could have seen only if his character, his nature, had been different. It is for this reason that after the flood, God seems to resign himself to knowing that our nature precludes us from honoring some limits.

Similarly, seeing and imagination are often intertwined in stories about limitations and punishment for transgressing limits. When Lot's wife is fleeing the destruction of Sodom she is told "Escape for your life, do not gaze behind you, do not stand still anywhere in the plain: to the hill-country escape, lest you be swept away!" When she defies the injunction and turns to look, "she became a

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759. On this, see especially, Kerrigan 1996, 34ff., where he says that those who died violently were thought likely to be a uniquely dangerous class of spirits. Also, in *Laws*, 865d–e, Plato says a murdered man "is wroth with his slayer when newly slain, and being . . . disquieted himself . . . with all his might disquiets his slayer."

pillar of salt."[760] Similar instructions are ignored when Orpheus leads Eurydice out of Hades and he is told not to look to see whether Eurydice is behind him. The punishment is that he loses her for good.[761] In another story, when Psyche is told not to look into the box containing a token of Proserpina's beauty, she is overwhelmed by her curiosity and vanity, looks inside and is cursed with Stygian sleep. Cupid rescues her eventually and she is made a goddess, but the point of the story was clear.[762] On the other hand, when we do see properly, the result is good. When Perseus is told not to look at the Gorgon's head of Medusa, he obeys, escaping petrification by looking instead at Medusa's reflection on his shield.[763]

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the hero, Dante/Pilgrim, survives a long odyssey through the landscapes ordinarily forbidden to all mortals. Because he "sees" correctly with the aid of Virgil and Beatrice, because he holds to his faith, he survives. But he is also tested, and dramatically informed that while he has enjoyed the privileges of his journey, there are limits to what he should know. The lesson comes in the *Paradiso* when Peter Damian descends a golden ladder to receive Dante. Instead of being shown what is within his proper limits, Dante boldly asks questions about how it came to be that Damian was chosen for his task. Dante is allowed to proceed despite the presumptuousness of the question, but a message about forbidden knowledge is made clear:

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760. Genesis 19: 17, 19: 26.

761. Gantz 1993, 722–25.

762. Gantz 1993, 3–4. Gantz only touches on this story; most of it comes from the second century writer Apuleius in his *The Golden Ass*.

763. Gantz 1993, 304–07.

> The truth you seek to fathom lies so deep in the abyss of the eternal law, it is cut off from every creature's sight. And tell the mortal world when you return what I told you, so that no man presume to try to reach a goal as high as this.[764]

The rebuke is intended for the presumptuous questions being asked by Renaissance thinkers and scientists in their quest for knowledge: humanity might properly see what God allows, but beware of exceeding what is beyond propriety. The entirety of Dante's one hundred cantos, however, makes clear that he is uncertain where this boundary lies. When he encounters Ulysses (Odysseus) in the eighth circle of the Inferno, Dante suggests, through Ulysses, that curiosity about "that which lies beyond"[765] is natural to humanity, but the result of its exploration will be both the gaining of understanding and the punishment that follows exceeding limits.

Unlike Lot's wife, Perseus, Orpheus, and Psyche, we think of Oedipus being so bound by the oracles' reports about fate and blood curses that, despite the pride for which the chorus condemns him,[766] he may have been unable to do otherwise, trapped by his nature. We continue to be uncertain about Oedipus and about us: how much of his story, and our, is contingent and how much fated.

We remain fascinated by the promise of what Prometheus brings and at the same time wonder how much of his gift comes hand-in-hand with Pandora and her box. In the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne warns that "Presumption is our natural and original malady. . . . it is by the vanity of this

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764. *Paradiso* 21: 94–102. In Musa 1981.

765. *Inferno*, 26: 114–17.

very imagination that man sets himself up as the equal of God."[767] He has a similar warning in his *Apology* when he says "Christians have a special knowledge of the degree to which curiosity is a natural and original evil," which is "why ignorance is so strongly recommended to us by our religion as the appropriate path to belief and obedience." Still, he says, "A man can be only what he is and can imagine only according to his reach."[768] Like trying to step farther than the length of our legs, which would be "impossible and monstrous," Montaigne warns, "The same goes for man's attempt to rise above himself and humanity."[769]

Montaigne, of course, did not accept the restrictions, though he, like Pascal, knew there were consequences for transgression. Pascal too recommends, "Let us then know our reach. We are something, and not everything. . . . Our intelligence occupies in the order of intelligible things the same place as our body in the extent of nature."[770] Montaigne and Pascal wrote during a time marked by the beginning of dramatic explorations in science and when the culture had begun wondering about its previous suspicions of exploring nature. Whereas the search for understanding had been thought to be akin to repeating the sin of Adam and Eve—of seeking god-like knowledge—some found ways to throw off much of the restriction. Petrarch in 1336 enjoyed "admiring earthly things." Three hundred years later Galileo threw

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766. *OT* 963.

767. Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, 501.

768. Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, 501.

769. Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, 588.

770. Pascal 1965, *Pensees*, 199.

open the door to allow imagination and curiosity space to expand. Francis Bacon, with his *The Advancement of Learning* in the seventeenth century, provided the justification:

> God has framed the mind like a glass, capable of the image of the universe. . . . Let no one weakly imagine that man can search too far, or be too well studied in the book of God's word, and works, divinity, and philosophy.[771]

We should limit ourselves, Bacon said, only in that the "proud" knowledge of good and evil seeks to go places God would rather we didn't. The "pure" knowledge of nature is a justified contemplation of and glorification of God's work.

Bacon answers Augustine's assertion in his *Confessions* that, of the three temptations, desire for knowledge may be the most dangerous:

> There is also present in the soul, by means of these bodily senses, a kind of empty longing and curiosity, which aims not at taking pleasure in the flesh but at acquiring experience through the flesh, and this empty curiosity is dignified by the names of learning and science. Since this is in the appetite for knowing, and since the eyes are the chief of our senses for acquiring knowledge, it is called in the divine language the lust of the eyes.[772]

Again here—following Oedipus, Lot's wife, Dante, and others—it is the eyes—those instruments of seeing—that represent acquisition of knowledge and that bring the danger of transgressing limits, of crossing into territory reserved for the divine.

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771. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning,* book I.

772. *Confessions* X.35.

*c. Changing medical constructs*

Nicholas Rescher argues that "some information is simply not safe for us." This is not because there is "something wrong with its possession in the abstract, but because it is the sort of thing we humans are not well suited to cope with."[773] He raises the question:

> Are there also moral limits to the possession of information per se—are there things we ought not to know on moral grounds? . . . . Here, inappropriateness lies only in the mode of acquisition or in the prospect of misuse. With information, possession in and of itself—independently of the matter of its acquisition and utilization—cannot involve moral impropriety.[774]

Robert Oppenheimer, who had said during the first test of the atomic bomb, "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds,"[775] warned later in a 1947 speech at MIT:

> Despite the vision and the far-seeing wisdom of our war-time heads of state, the physicists felt a peculiarly intimate responsibility for suggesting, for supporting, and in the end, in large measure, for achieving the realization of atomic weapons. Nor can we forget that these weapons, as they were in fact used, dramatized so mercilessly the inhumanity and evil of modern war. In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.[776]

The National Bioethics Advisory Commission 1997 report on cloning speaks to the problem Oppenheimer raised when it said humanity has displayed a "propensity to use their divinely authorized dominion for unauthorized

773. Rescher 1984, 9.

774. Rescher 1984, 9.

775. Oppenheimer drew the quotation from the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

776. Oppenheimer 1947, 193.

domination" and a "tendency to transgress limits."[777] The commission implies that despite Rescher's assertion that mere possession of information cannot involve moral impropriety, human propensities have shown that once acquired, information has a tendency to be used. The issue then becomes the likelihood of the prospect for misuse. The difficulties become especially troublesome when we seem to move into in-between places—liminal periods of entering territory not just unfamiliar, but profoundly different in kind. The in-between stages may last for many centuries, but they clearly mark times when we cross thresholds into new ways of thought and practice.

One way to understand the process we are experiencing in deciding how to respond to new information about the human genome and related technological processes is to see how roughly analogous dilemmas were resolved in the past.

For example, the ancient world experienced similar changes in crossing a threshold when it moved from the "magico-religious" healing of seer-physician-philosophers such as Empedocles[778] in the sixth and fifth centuries to the "empirico-rational"[779] methods of the Hippocratic physicians. Difficulties arose during that period about what to do with the new "scientific" information. How did it compare to what had been done in the past? What needs to be set aside

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777. *Cloning Human Beings.* Report and recommendations of the National Bioethics Advisory Commission, 1997, chapter 3, 47.

778. On Empedocles, see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 280–321. Also see Kingsley 1995.

779. These categories are used by Sigerist 1951, v.1. The distinction between the Hippocratics and other healers is made by Robert Bartz in Kuczewski & Polansky 2000, 3ff.

from past understandings? And how might the past and the present meld into something more helpful than dangerous?

A second threshold was the gradual process of coming to accept the use of dissection and autopsy of human bodies, along with the eventual rejection of vivisection. When dissection was viewed as crossing a proscribed boundary against cutting into body, arguments were employed that sound very similar to those surrounding genetic interference today. We hear that unzipping the human gene and then altering it to suit our interests is going too far, crossing the line, inappropriately doing God's work. Similarly, unzipping the human body for autopsies, dissections, and vivisections caused expressions of moral repugnance that claimed the same violations.

If we could chart the way it became permissible to penetrate the skin to understand and manipulate the interior of the body, we might have a view of how in the future it will become permissible to penetrate and alter the interior of genes. Similarly, a description of the shift from "magico-religious" to "empirico-rational" healing may tell us something about the way we incorporate new information into our cultural moral image. These, together with the enduring values I suggested earlier in reference to their appearance in ancient stories, may provide some of the background understanding to help us in how we proceed along the threshhold of the developing genetic age.

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*1. Empirico-rational healing*

The presocratic sixth century Ionian nature philosophers began the transformation toward empirico-rational healing by providing, however

speculatively, the theoretical underpinning for "scientific" medicine. Most of these early thinkers had little direct influence on theories of disease because their interest was primarily the working of the universe, not specifically the physiology of man. But the methods they developed would be used in the fifth and later centuries to formulate medical theories. They began with the assumption that everything has a cause and so the world must have a cause too, one that does not necessarily require a supernatural or transcendental source.

It is tempting to think that magic and mysticism, as irrational elements of religion and medicine, were displaced by rationalism and scientific notions. But for the Greeks as well as others, the natural and supernatural serve different purposes. Magical beliefs and practices of a wide variety of kinds can be documented from Homer to the end of antiquity and onward.[780] The prevalence of Asclepian temple medicine, for example, continued well into the Christian era.[781] Relying on incubation—divinely inspired dream therapy—and dietetics, it existed side-by-side with rational medicine, sometimes as an alternative, sometimes as an additional source of healing, and perhaps incorporating the developing scientific method into its regimen. Lloyd says people resisted the takeover of scientific thought:

> It was mainly through myth, in belief, and through ritual, in practice, that the Greeks, like others, responded to the facts of death and disease, for example – and it remained so, even after the inquiry concerning nature was some kind of going concern. Yet to say the Greeks "responded to" natural facts through myth is not quite accurate. For myth is not, and does not aim to be, explicitly systematic and coherent.[782]

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780. Bartz 2000, 4-5. Also see Dodds 1951, ch. 6.

781. Edelstein 1945, 1:179ff.; 2:139ff.; *Walton* 1894, 36ff.

782. Lloyd 1985, 4-5.

When the Hippocratics began writing during the late fifth, through the fourth, and perhaps into the third centuries, their efforts marked one of the phases in our communal effort to determine whether there is a realm for the divine and a realm for humanity, and whether the veil between the two acts as a shield behind which is an inviolable realm. For the Hippocratics, if there was a veil, it mostly had to do with things other than their practice of healing. For them, the body was to be adjusted rather than the heavens consulted.

As Lloyd asserts, this was not the case for everyone, and it was only partly true for the Hippocratics and other healers who came after them. While the movement during the fifth century and later was toward a more rational medicine, throughout antiquity in every part of the ancient world the prevalent mode of healing was based upon magic, folk beliefs, and the powers of chthonic and Olympian deities.[783] Rational medicine that excluded divine caprice was the exception. Home remedies ranging from eggs to sheep dung and snakes' heads, amulets and incantations, and various herbal remedies from saffron to poppy-tears were all available and widely used without relying on professional doctors.[784]

A combination of explanations for ailments can be seen in the Homeric poems, long before Hippocratic medicine began developing—which suggests that "rational" medicine did not spring from nothing, but rather, from common

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783. Lloyd 1987, chapter one. Also see Lloyd 1979, 29ff. and note 98, which includes additional references for this subject.

784. Celsus lists many of the drugs and herbal remedies along with descriptions of their uses and descriptions of surgical tools, in *De Medicina* 2.xv-lxiii, and in more detail in *De Medicina* 5.

sense ideas that when you stub a toe on a rock, the broken bone could have been caused by divine action, but also by inattention. An implication of this is that when we see in stories differing attributions of causation, it suggests that people were involved in a process of sorting out what to do with their beliefs and knowledge. They sought by various means to learn when to apply this or that response to an ailment or wound. It was thought, for example, that evil, semi-divine creatures wandered the earth causing disease.[785] Decisions about how to respond to their actions probably involved amulets, magic, mysterious herbal remedies, and a variety of other treatments. But not all ill health resulted from divinity. In the *Iliad*, ailments result from a combination of causes. Some wounds arise in battle; others from the darts of Apollo or Artemis. A plague of disease was sent by Apollo to punish Agamemnon's forces,[786] arriving in a "burning wind" of "pain and sorrow," first killing mules and dogs, then soldiers:

> . . . . . the bundled arrows
> clanged on the sky behind as he rocked in his anger,
> descending like night itself. Apart from the ships
> he halted and let fly, and the bowstring slammed
> as the silver bow sprang, rolling in thunder away.
> Pack animals were his target first, and dogs,
> but soldiers, too, soon felt transfixing pain
> from his hard shots, and pyres burned night and day.
> Nine days the arrows of the god came down
> broadside upon the army.[787]

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785. See the citations in the previous note, as well as Hesiod's *WD* 102ff.

786. *Iliad* 1.43ff. Also see *Iliad* 6.428, 19.59, 24.758f., *Odyssey* 3.279f., 5.123f., 11.324, 15.478f., 18.202ff., 20.61ff.

787. *Iliad* 1.53–62.

When sacrifices and the return of Chryses' daughter appease Apollo,[788] the Greeks purify themselves, then cleanse their camp by throwing "defilements" into the sea. This was clearly the result of divine displeasure. Other ills result from causes closer at hand, and some from a combination of both. Cures, then, often had to comprise both categories. For example, when Odysseus was wounded on a hunting trip by a boar goring him in the leg, he was bandaged by the sons of his maternal grandfather, Autolycus, and then they stopped his bleeding by singing incantations over the wound.[789] In other cases, causation and cure was univocal. The *Odyssey*, for example, refers to a man who became sick with great pains after being attacked by a terrible demon. He was healed by the gods.[790] In other instances, the cause was mundane and the cure divine: Diomedes, wounded by an arrow, prayed to Athene for help and she restored him to health so that he could return to the battle.[791] Similarly, when Aeneas's hip was crushed by a stone thrown by Diomedes, he was rescued by Apollo, and cured by Artemis and Leto.[792]

So physicians were needed partly to bandage wounds and apply poultices, but also to beseech and appease gods or drive out demons with prayers, supplications, sacrifices, spells, and incantations.[793] The common thread is that cures were sought by what was thought to be the appropriate means, relying

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788. See above, section III.b.

789. *Odyssey* 19.455–458.

790. *Odyssey* 5.394.

791. *Iliad* 5.99ff.

792. *Iliad* 305ff, 447f.

793. Longrigg 1963, 147-175.

upon seen and unseen forces. The sorting out of what was and was not appropriate was done in a way not entirely unlike our trying to decide what information to use in which situations.

The process became significantly more like the sorting out we do when the practice and understanding of medicine shifted in such a way that over time the craft became more of a science. This change generated a complex set of questions about how medicine should be done, who should do it, and who would use it. But it occurred in the context of a range of practices from which to choose, and many healers employed the entirety of possibilities.

Temple medicine was one layer of healing available in antiquity, sometimes as the primary source but also as an alternative to pursue when surgery, diet, and drugs failed—or when patients could not afford to see a physician.[794] Even as late as the first century, Diodorus Siculus asserts that "when the art of the physician fails, everybody resorts to incantations and prayers."[795] And at least a century later, by the end of the first century C.E., Plutarch reports that, "Those who are ill with chronic diseases and do not succeed by the usual remedies and the customary diet turn to purifications and amulets and dreams."[796] When the human physician could not do anything, it was expected that the patient would go to the temples of Asclepius for "incubation" treatment by the priests acting on behalf of the gods.

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794. See Cohn-Haft 1956; also Pellegrino 1979; and Temkin 1949.

795. Diodorus, Frag. 30.43, Diels.

796. Plutarch, *Pericles*, ch. 38, in Stadter 1989, 301.

Incubation worked in the following way: After purification rites directed by priests, patients slept in the *abaton*, the holiest part of the temple. During sleep, the patient was said to receive a dream in which Asclepius would appear to heal or advise about treatments. When the patient awoke, priests interpreted the dreams and prescribed treatments, which usually involved diet, exercise, and occasional herbal remedies including salves and drugs. One inscription mentions the god ordering a patient to eat partridge with frankincense. Another is told to swim in rivers; others are sent to compose odes. Sometimes the god is reported to cut the body open during a patient's dream, repair the ailment, and leave the skin unscarred on awakening. In some dreams sacred dogs or serpents cured the patients by licking them. Sometimes the god cured by touching his hand to the spot of the illness, or by kissing. Those who were healed left votive offerings, such as terra cotta models of eyes, ears, limbs, and other organs that were healed, which have been found in considerable numbers at the sanctuaries. Several cases recorded on marble tablets in the temples are clearly fictional: a woman gave birth to a child she had carried for five years; another woman awoke with a new eye in her vacant eye-socket.[797]

Edelstein says the temples were especially important to the poor because the priests were happy with small offerings whereas professional medical care was expensive:

> Philanthropy was the ideal set before the physician. Yet, with the necessary allowance for individual kindness and willingness to help even without adequate renumeration physicians on the whole were businessmen, and no moral or professional code . . . obliged them to give their service to the needy.[798]

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797. Walton 1894, 57ff; Edelstein 1967, 150ff.

798. Edelstein 1967, 175.

Walton says that no well-known citizens are found on lists of suppliants at the temples, suggesting that it was not the wealthy, ruling class that frequented them.[799]

Rational/Hippocratic medicine was once thought to have originated in these temples because a temple of Asclepius was found on Cos, the island on which Hippocrates was born and where there was a large medical school. But archaeological evidence showed that the temple was built long after the medical school and scholars have since come to believe that temple medicine existed alongside rational medicine rather than one growing out of the other.[800]

Thus, while a series of natural rather than divine explanations was being developed for disease and other phenomena, the day-to-day life of antiquity retained strong beliefs in the supernatural, and this would continue to be a strong element of healing for many, many more centuries. One reason for this is that not only did temple medicine exist alongside rational practice, each seemed to draw from the other. Dream healings, for example, were the province of temple priests who combined them with ritualistic singing and amulets. But medical writers in the Hippocratic and other collections also devised elaborate theories about dreams and their role in diagnosis. Among the earliest speculations is Empedocles' assertion in the mid-fifth century that thoughts and dreams vary with changes in the body. Later in the century, the Hippocratic text *Epidemics* states that "dreams, their nature and their time" are among the items

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799. Walton 1894, 58.

800. Walton 1894, 59.

in the general list of factors to be considered in diagnosis.[801] The Hippocratic *On Diet* is a treatise about dreams and their interpretation, distinguishing two kinds of dreams. One is sent by gods presaging good or bad luck and is the business of diviners. The other is of physical origin and describes ailments.[802]

Even later medical authorities such as Herophilus in the third century and Galen in the second century CE took dreams seriously. Epicurus and Xenophanes alone among ancient Greek philosophers left writings in which they reject divine dreams.[803] Galen, in a second century commentary on book I of *Epidemics*,[804] states that therapies for arteriotomy and various diagnoses were suggested to him by dreams. Herophilus in the third century distinguishes dreams sent by God from those which are natural.[805] Aristotle concludes that "dreams are not sent by God," but suggests that careful attention should be paid to them since they can provide information about changes occurring in the body. He says dreams correspond to movements in the body, notably in the sense organs, and these movements are transmitted to the soul. During the day these movements are not noticed since so many impressions are received by the soul. But at night, traces of the daytime impressions are registered in the soul if the soul is in a stable condition.[806] Something similar to Aristotle's fourth century description is evident in the late fifth-century Hippocratic text *On Regimen*,

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801. *Epidemics* 1.10; 2.670.8.

802. Edelstein 1967, 6.642.

803. Dodds 1951, 119.

804. Temkin 1973.

805. Von Staden 1989, 306–10, 386–87, 449.

806. *On Divination in Sleep* 463.b.12ff.; 464.a.1ff.

which states that the soul is distracted by the various impressions while awake but at night, while asleep, "it becomes master in its own house." Then he explains his position in contrast to others':

> As for the god-given dreams which give to cities and to individuals foreknowledge of bad things and of good, there are interpreters with their own art in these matters. Such people also interpret the signs derived from the soul which indicate bodily affections in advance: excess, whether of repletion or depletion, of what is natural, or some unusual change. In such matters they are sometimes right and sometimes wrong, but in neither case do they know why it happens, neither when they are right nor when they are wrong. But they give advice to beware of taking harm: and yet they do not teach you how you ought to beware, but merely instruct you to pray to the gods. Prayer is a good thing, but one should take on part of the burden oneself and call on the gods only to help.[807]

Although some physicians believed that dreams caused by physical factors were intelligible to them, doctors generally were not considered able to interpret divine dreams; that was left to priests. Edelstein argues that because most doctors seem to have accepted the divine origin of dreams, they probably did not object to temple healing as either an alternative or an adjunct to scientific treatment. If dreams come from gods, there would be no reason to object to healing by priests according to divine advice, which usually was in the form of diet, rest, exercise, and prayer.[808] Neither the primary nor the secondary sources make clear whether dreams were widely used for prognosis, but several scholars imply that since physicians' reputations in the fifth century depended at least partly on their ability to both diagnose and prognose, many practitioners used dreams as well as other tools to deduce the outcome of disease.[809]

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807. *On Regimen* 4.87.

808. Edelstein 1967, 241–243

809. See especially Lloyd 1987, 34–41; and Edelstein 1967, 243.

Some Hippocratic treatises recommend prognosis in terms that are little if at all different from prophecy or divination. In *Epidemics* physicians are urged to "declare the past, determine the present, foretell the future."[810] This parallels Hesiod's *Theogony,* which says the muses "Tell of what is, and what is to be, and what was before now."[811] Some of the purpose to foretelling is to advance the doctor's reputation; patients will more readily entrust themselves to his care if he can tell them not just the outcome of the disease, but its past course and present condition. For this the doctor will 'justly be an object of wonder."[812] Other Hippocratics, however, see the danger of medicine being confused with divination. The *Prorrhetic* warns that it is not possible to make "marvelous" and exact predictions in medicine.[813]

Knowing whether disease is divine was important in antiquity because, if divine, what was the physician's role? If everything was divinely necessary then there might have been reason to avoid physicians and let gods manage the illness, or seek the intercession of priests and magicians. Most philosophers and physicians would have responded as Herophilus did, saying that if disease is divine, nature is divine, thus plants are divine, hence plants as healing agents are "the hands of the gods" and the physician as pharmacologist is merely aiding the hands of gods.[814]

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810. *Epidemics* 1.5.

811. *Theogony* 41–42.

812. *Prognosis* I, 2.110.2ff.

813. *Prorrhetic* 2.19, 4.474.12f.

814. Von Staden 1989, 143ff.

In this sense, magic, music, and other tools were often rejected as irrational. Referring to users of incantations, the Hippocratic book *On the Sacred Disease* states, "What they profess is not true, the fact being that men, in need of a livelihood, contrive and devise many fictions of all sorts."[815] Sophocles similarly suggests rejecting incantation when, in *Ajax*, Ajax says, "No good physician quavers incantations when the malady he's treating needs the knife."[816] In later antiquity, the prohibition becomes more direct: Soranus argues that it would be stupid to believe illness can be expelled by songs and Galen notes that incantations and songs should be rejected.[817]

Dodds asserts that while some of the more educated Greeks rejected incantations and such, magic became even more popular for everyone else. He attributes this to the generalized instability in Greece during the late fifth century. Belief in traditional religion was tottering and faith in civic institutions was in decline. But old ways still held sway.[818] Thus, while many Greek physicians or philosophical schools denied that demons caused disease, the continuing belief that malicious beings and magical powers affect disease is attested to by the Neo-Platonist Plotinus, who, referring to magicians in late antiquity, says:

> They tell us they can free themselves of diseases . . . they assert diseases to be Spirit-Beings and boast of being able to expel them by formulae: this pretension may enhance their importance with the crowd, gaping upon the powers of magicians; but they can never persuade the intelligent that disease arises otherwise than from such causes as overstrain, excess, deficiency, putrid decay . . . The nature of illness is indicated by its very

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815. *On the Sacred Disease* 1.c,147.

816. *Ajax* 582-583.

817. Edelstein 1967, 238.

818. Dodds 1951, ch. 6.

> cure. A motion, a medicine, the letting of blood, and the disease shifts down and away.[819]

This suggests that while many Greeks began accepting at least some of the new ideas about illness being caused by out-of-balance humors, climate, air, winds, and so forth, they also likely viewed these causes as the expression—actively or passively—of divine agencies. The entirely natural explanation of disease was probably more unusual than the superstitious belief in demons. Philosophers and physicians may have tended toward an understanding of nature without overt reference to divine power, but they were not much more immune to supernatural tendencies than anyone else. Gods and science could coexist, one not necessitating the abnegation of the other. The Hippocratic *Airs, Waters, Places,* for example, holds that while disease has natural cause, it is simultaneously divine in origin:

> these diseases are divine, and so are all others, no one being more divine or more human than any other; all are alike, and all divine. Each of them has a nature of its own, and none arises without its natural cause.[820]

Similar beliefs continued through antiquity. Several centuries after the Hippocratics, the physician Galen describes his treatise *On the Use of the Parts* as a "sacred" book composed as a hymn to the world-soul, or creator (demiurge), so that he can "show to others how wise he is, how powerful, and how good."[821] For Galen, if god did not exist, the world would be governed by chance, not by intelligible laws or causation. Thus, "his wish to bring the whole cosmos into

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819. MacKenna 1921–1930, 235.

820. *Airs, Waters, Places* 22.1.c, 127.

821. *On the Use of Parts* 3.10.1ff.

order . . . and that he should have found out how best to order everything . . . is a proof of his perfect wisdom . . . and absolute goodness."[822]

As theological understandings evolved during this period, so did medical practice and belief. A thread beginning with the fifth century developed a theory of prognostics and clear steps of treatment based on the study of the progress and causes of disease. Toward the end of the century, Leucippus, the originator of atomic theory, declared that "Nothing comes to be at random, but everything for a reason and by necessity."[823] Similar beliefs reinforcing the shift were expressed later by the Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease,* whose author vows to

> expose as frauds those who claimed to be able to cure the disease by purifications, incantations and other ritual means. . . My own view is that those who first attributed a sacred character to this malady were like the magicians, purifiers, charlatans and quacks of our own day, men who claim great piety and superior knowledge. Being at a loss, and having no treatment which would help, they concealed and sheltered themselves behind superstition, and called this illness sacred, in order that their utter ignorance might not be manifest.[824]

What is important about this and other attacks in the treatise is that it is against all purifiers and against any idea that any disease is the result of divine intervention. The author concedes divinity only in that the whole of nature is divine. Lloyd finds in this many of the features of a paradigm shift in that the writer seems to be rejecting "the notion of supernatural intervention in natural phenomena as a whole."[825] The shift is clear in Lucretius: "All nature, as it is in

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822. *On the Use of Parts* 3.10.16ff.

823. Furley 1967, 6.

824. *On the Sacred Disease* I.41.

825. Lloyd 1979, 26.

itself, consists of two things: there are bodies and there is void in which the bodies are and through which they move."[826] With Promethean fierceness, Lucretius goes on to describe the courage of his mentor Epicurus's battle against the "foul" crush of superstitution:

> When human life lay foul for all to see
> Upon the earth, crushed by the burden of religion,
> Religion which from heaven's firmament
> Displayed its face, its ghastly countenance,
> Lowering above mankind, the first who dared
> Raise mortal eyes against it, first to take
> His stand against it, was a man of Greece.
> He was not cowed by fables of the gods
> Or thunderbolts or heaven's threatening roar,
> But they the more spurred on his ardent soul
> Yearning to be the first to break apart
> The bolts of nature's gates and throw them open.[827]

It was not that Lucretius did not believe divinity existed in some form; instead, he declared that gods do not proscribe humanity from exploring and understanding nature. The foolish superstititions created by people establish most boundaries. The gods had nothing to do with that. They merely allow nature to be laid open "in every part displayed," while they live in "quiet abodes which no winds every shake . . . (and) nothing comes to vex the tranquil tenor of their minds."[828] Nothing comes to vex their minds, including the efforts of humanity. W. R. Johnson says that what Lucretius found maddening was not claims about gods' existence, but the accounts that anthropomorphized them in ways suggesting they were concerned about the small flailings of humanity's endeavors.[829]

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826. Lucretius 1.60.

827. Lucretius 1.62–79.

828. Lucretius 3.28–24, Latham, tr.

829. Johnson 2000, 12.

Lucretius says that as human beings shook off superstitions and applied their analytical talent to understanding the universe, they gradually learned more and more in a process demonstrating the triumph of reason:

> As step by step they made their forward way.
> So each thing in its turn by slow degrees
> Time doth bring forward to the lives of men,
> And reason lifts it to the light of day.
> For as one concept followed on another
> Men saw it form and brighten in their minds
> Till by their arts they scaled the highest peak.[830]

Ronald Melville says Lucretius's poem "constantly recalls us from the mists and darkness of false belief to the plain light of scientific reasoning."[831] What attracts us to this, Melville asserts, is the same quality that attracted us to the Enlightenment project of freeing humanity from delusion. It is the "images of Nature unchained, of the hero Epicurus challenging heaven and bringing back victory over it."[832]

Lucretius offers a view of the universe as it would be after Prometheus's predictions have come true. Prometheus, by way of Epicurus and Lucretius, has unthroned Zeus. In the passage of a few centuries, humanity's exploration of nature proceeded from Hesiod's semi-divinities creeping around the planet spewing disease, to the scientist applying reason to see into places once forbidden. The study of nature continued to be circumscribed in various ways, but the acceptability of seeking natural understanding was established. For Lucretius and centuries later the scientists of the Enlightenment, this was not just

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830. Lucretius 5.1453–57.

831. Melville 1997, xxviii.

832. Melville 1997, xxviii.

accepting the search for natural understanding, it was a rebellious proclamation of defiance, toppling not just Zeus but all of the unseen and mysterious universe:

> If anyone decides to call the sea Neptune,
> And corn Ceres, and misuse the name of Bacchus
> Rather than give grape juice its proper title,
> Let us agree that he can call the earth
> Mother of the Gods, on this condition—
> that he refuses to pollute his mind
> With the foul poison of religion.[833]

Lucretius argued for a way of seeing and examining the universe that by the early twenty first century looks like a precursor to reductionistic views. It is a radical and defiant position reacting to a legacy that painted the universe in the metaphors of mythology—the view Hesiod described when he spoke about evil, marginally divine beings creeping unseen upon the earth spewing disease and misery. Lucretius represents the end point of the paradigm shift Lloyd speaks about.

### *2. Dissection and autopsy*

Just as the ancient world underwent a transformative process in the shift from magical and mythological explanations toward scientific and rational explanations, the Hellenic and Medieval worlds experienced a transformation in coming to accept dissection of human bodies.

During the transformation of medicine that occurred in the fifth, fourth and into the early third century, the emphasis was on prognosis and therapy, not on anatomical investigation. The unexplored inside of the body was thought to

833. Lucretius 2.652–60.

operate on the basis of humoral physiopathology based on knowledge of what was breathed, eaten, and expelled.[834] Vegetti asserts that the essential alteration in medical thinking after that period was the shift during the Hellenistic period from a focus on disease to a focus on understanding the natural, normal state of human bodies, and hence, health.[835] Herophilus in the first half of the third century was instrumental in this when he distinguished among three kinds of medical knowledge: health, disease, and surgical/pharmacological.[836] He abandoned, mostly, the description of the body as a contained of fluids, which was the Hippocratic humoral physiology, and replaced it with descriptions of the body as an assembly of solid parts.[837] Erasistratus, too, a contemporary of Herophilus, distinguished between anatomophysiology and therapy.[838] His anatomical studies demonstrated a distinction between sensory and motor nerves obtained by post-mortem dissections and possibly vivisections.[839]

Some have suggested that dissections were performed by the Homeric physicians on grounds that their knowledge of the body could be possible only if they had experience with dissection. The assertions are inconclusive, mostly because they require much imaginative extrapolation. Edelstein argues that what anatomy was known was probably obtained by battlefield observation or by inspecting the corpses of sacrificed human beings.

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834. On the epistemology of Hippocratic medicine, see Vegetti 1998.

835. Vegetti 1998, 73.

836. Von Staden 1989, fragment 42.

837. Vegetti 1998, 85.

838. Vegetti 1998, 74.

839. Vegetti 1998, 83.

If dissections were employed by the Hippocratic physicians, Edelstein argues, they they were not done systematically and garnered little information.[840] But if he is correct and they were not generally used, why not? It would seem that the Hippocratics as well as others during this period were enormously curious. A dead body must have evinced more than small temptation in healers who speculated about humours and the various effects of heat and cold on internal workings.

Edelstein asserts that dissection was generally unlikely because of "religious and magical concepts, veneration of the dead, and dread of the corpse . . ." Thus, accounts of dissection and vivisection were declared to be "wicked inventions by which one school sought to discredit the other."[841] As a result, Edelstein says physicians knew little detail about anatomy. What is known may be the result, like that of the Homeric physicians, of battlefield observation, accidental wounds, dissection of animals, and perhaps an occasional human dissection done despite the prohibition. The treatise *On the Heart* is regarded as the most accurate of the Hippocratic anatomic observations and apparently is the result of careful dissection of animal, not human, hearts.

Only infrequently before the third century do any writers mention the use of dissection to gain information about anatomy and physiology.[842] Von Staden is inconclusive about when it became a common method of inquiry. *On Ancient Medicine* notes the difficulty of getting information about the internal body, but

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840. Edelstein 1967, 248.

841. Edelstein 1967, 249.

rather than discuss dissection, the author suggests studying objects on the outside of the body.[843] In neither of the two treatises that give good accounts of blood vessels and sense organs, *On the Places in Man* and *On Fleshes,*[844] does the author indicate he learned about these from dissection.

Were dissections not done or just not reported because of the likely religious objection? Aristotle dissected animals, but said in reference to human cadavers that, "no one can look at the elements of the human frame—blood, flesh, bones, vessels, and the like—without much repugnance."[845] Additionally, he explains that it is "the total form" which one should study, just as the

> true object of architecture is not bricks, mortar, or timber, but the house; and so the principal object of natural philosophy is not the material elements, but their composition, and the totality of the substance, independently of which they have no existence.[846]

Aristotle also says the inner parts of human beings are unknown, and may be better left that way:

> The inner parts of man are to a very great extent unknown, and the consequence is that we must have recourse to an examination of the inner parts of other animals whose nature in any resembles that of man.[847]

One reason dissections may seldom have been performed is the difficulties faced by early researchers. Lloyd points to this when he says that:

> For a dissection to be carried out successfully requires not only patience, attention to detail and practical skill, but also and more importantly a clear

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842. Lloyd 1979, 157.

843. *On Ancient Medicine* 16.

844. *On the Places in Man* 30ff; *On Fleshes* 88ff; also see Lloyd 1979, 158f.

845. *Parts of Animals* 645a28-30.

846. *Parts of Animals* 645a33ff.

847. *History of Animals* 494b22ff.

> conception of what to look for. . . after dissections had begun to be made on the heart, it was some time before the valves, for instance, came to be recognized as such.[848]

Herophilus and Erasistratus in the first half of the third century were the first physicians, about whom we have evidence, who regularly conducted dissections of human bodies. They also are said to have done vivisections on animals and on humans, especially criminals, the chief evidence for which is Celsus's first century C.E. *De Medicina*:

> Herophilus and Erasistratus proceeded in by far the best way: they cut open living men, criminals they obtained out of prison from the kings, and they observed, while their subjects still breathed, parts that nature had previously hidden, their position, colour, shape, size, arrangement, hardness, softness, smoothness, points of contact, and finally the processes and recesses of each and whether any part is inserted into another or receives the part of another into itself.[849]

The veracity of this report has been questioned, but without adequate reason to reject it.[850] Von Staden says that live prisoners were made available to Herophilus and possibly to Erasistratus for vivisection but that if so, this was "in contravention of a pristine taboo" against opening the human body.[851] But von Staden neither explains nor cites a source for the taboo. True or not, the report does show that the issue was debated. Most people, Celsus says, considered it a cruel practice, but he says others defended it by arguing that "They laid open men whilst alive . . . and whilst these were still breathing, observed parts which beforeheand nature had concealed, their position, colour, shape, size . . . Nor is it,

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848. Lloyd 1979, 161.

849. *De Medicina* I, Preface 23f.

850. For the debate on this, see Edelstein 1967, 249f.

851. Von Staden 1989, 26, 29.

as most people say, cruel that in the execution of criminals, and but a few of them, we should seek remedies for innocent people of all future ages."[852]

While Herophilus cited the necessity of dissection to learn how the body works,[853] other physicians rejected both dissection and vivisection as irrelevant and superfluous, since on death the body is changed. Celsus says these other physicians argued that:

> the inquiry about obscure causes and natural actions is superfluous because nature cannot be comprehended. Rejecting the use of reasoning partly on the grounds that in theorising it is always possible to argue either side of a question, they held that practical experience of treatments is the sole source of medical knowledge. There is no need to inquire how we breathe, but only what relieves laboured breathing, no need to find out what moves the blood-vessels, only what the various types of movement signify. Dissection is superfluous, and vivisection should be rejected on the further grounds that it is cruel.[854]

The philosophical justification for Herophilus's position here is found in Plato's *Phaedo* and *Laws,* which taught that the soul is an independent and immortal entity that carries its physical body only as an envelope or instrument to be discarded at death. Aristotle said the soul, although not separable and immortal, was the purpose of the organism. The body is merely that which encases the soul.[855] From these claims, it would not be much of a jump to allowing dead bodies to be used for anatomical study, the important part—the soul—having already departed.

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852. *De Medicina* I, Preface, 23–26.

853. Von Staden 1989, 139-154.

854. *De Medicina* I, Preface, 26, 1.21.29-32.

855. *On the Parts of Animals* I, 641a17ff.

Herophilus's role was also important in establishing in contemporary thinking that there was a distinction between philosophy and medicine. Among other things the distinction allowed medical researchers to argue that concerns about the soul, or about philosophical proscriptions on entering the body did not have to apply to scientific inquiry. Vegetti asserts that what Herophilus "fundamentally rejected was the necessity of incorporating into medicine, at its very foundation, the philosophical theory of elements or qualities over which medicine could not possibly exert any control."[856] Herophilus said medicine should be concerned with the phenomena learned about through dissection,[857] thereby following the Aristotelian division between natural philosophy and scientific medicine.[858] In this way he seemed to establish an independent place for medicine and ensuring it did not have to become involved in the debate among various philosophical schools.

It seems from the various evidence then that dissections and vivisections may have been occasionally performed during the sixth through early fourth centuries. Beginning later in the fourth century they probably became more common and by the first half of the third century, with Erasistratus and Herophilus, dissection of human bodies became a routine source of information. By the early first century C.E., Celsus demands that dissections be done, but clearly opposes vivisection.[859]

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856. Vegetti 1998, 85.

857. Von Staden 1989, 232.

858. *Sense and Sensibilia* 436a.18–20.

859. Edelstein 1967, 250.

Vegetti argues that this transformation accompanied a tension in the medical community between the theoreticians, concentrated at Alexandria especially in the work of Herophilus, and those who focused on dietetics, surgery, and pharmacology. There was crossover between the two, such that each side employed techniques of the other. But during the third and second centuries the practice of dissection eventually supplanted the Hippocratic physiology of humoral fluids in favor of anatomically based explanations.[860]

This change does not suggest a diminished role of the medical institutions of Alexandria. Von Staden describes its place in Hellenistic medicine as "scientific and literary frontiersmanship."[861] And Vegetti outlines the process by which Alexandria quickly adopted anatomical studies to incorporate into their theoretical understandings. This was enhanced by state support from the new dynasty of the Ptolemies. Thus,

> The new climate allowed physicians to venture to shatter an age-old taboo, tacit but daunting: anatomical intrusion into human cadavers. This step was necessary if they were to overcome the limits of observation inherent in the dissections of animals practiced by Aristotle. . . . And state support had an even more sensational effect: according to the unquestionable assertion of Celsus, Herophilus and Erasistratus were allowed to practice human vivisection upon criminals who had been sentenced to death and who were delivered into their hands for this purpose by the royal authorities.[862]

Aristotle may have provided the philosophical justification for vivisection by his claim that the parts of the corpse do not remain the same as those of a living person. Nevertheless, dissection of human beings, either dead or alive,

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860. Vegetti 1998, 74.

861. Von Staden 1989, 28ff.

862. Vegetti 1998, 82–83.

apparently stopped in Alexandria and elsewhere by the middle of the third century. The ban on dissection followed the expulsion from Alexandria of the intellectuals, ordered by Ptolemy III Euergetes in the middle of the third century. With this social upheaval came a return of the influence of Egyptian and Greek religious elements that reestablished theological taboos against entering dead or live human bodies. Dissections were not sanctioned again for hundreds of years. In the second century C.E., Galen wrote that he still had to rely on animal dissection and vivisection, although he recommended to his students that they should perhaps break into graves to observe human cadavers.[863]

Vegetti reports that outside of Hellenistic medicine, the Egyptian practice of mummification might have provided physicians with anatomical knowledge of the human body, but if it occurred we have no evidence. Two other factors tell against this as a source. One is that the people who prepared the corpses for mummification were "shunned as being tainted and were social outcasts,"[864] suggesting that in Egypt, too, there existed strict social taboos on entering the human body. The second is Von Staden's assertion that Alexandrian medicine had no intellectual or social contact with Egyptian medicine.[865]

Through most of the first millennium C.E. little is said in the surviving literature about dissection of human bodies. Dissection and vivisection of animals was common, but not, apparently, of humans. In the Islamic world, similar prohibitions were observed. In a commentary on Avicenna, Ibn an-Nafis, a

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863. Vegetti 1998, 83.

864. Vegetti 1998, 83.

865. Von Staden 1989, 3ff, 149ff.

physician and theologian, in the thirteenth century C.E., said that religious law and his "innate love of his neighbor prevented him from performing dissections himself." But Gotthard Strohmaier suggests this was for public consumption, that an-Nafis's knowledge of anatomy went well beyond the existent texts.[866]

In the mid-thirteenth century Roger Bacon wrote a treatise, *On the Errors of Physicians*, in which he condemns them for too much logical argumentation and not enough reliance on practical research.[867] During this period and through the fifteenth century, medical research was conducted from a variety of philosophical views, some pursuing rationalist methods, some empirical. Just before Bacon's treatise, an Italian, Mondino de' Liuzzi, published his *Anathomia*, the first study in the Western Middle Ages to describe dissection of a human body.

Jacquart asserts that the church never explicitly forbade dissection of human bodies, although there was a papal decree in 1299 threatening excommunication for dismembering of a cadaver or boiling pieces of a cadaver to remove the flesh form the bone. The decree is thought to have been referring not to anatomists but rather to an odd thirteenth century custom of cutting up bodies and burying them in different cemeteries. Given de' Liuzzi's treatise, it is likely, Jacquart argues, that by this period more researchers were exploring human anatomy by dissecting bodies.[868]

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866. Strohmaier 1998, 165.

867. Jacquart 1998, 220.

868. Jacquart 1998, 224–25.

Beginning in the early fourteenth century, dissections occurred with increasing frequency. In 1307, reports first appeared in Paris newspapers about surgeons announcing public exhibitions of corpses being examined. By the mid-fourteenth century, dissections and autopsies had apparently become routine, with physicians and surgeons jointly conducting officially sanctioned autopsies in public and in university halls.

No one event or social change led to the shift from reliance on animals for anatomical information to normalizing human dissection. Jacquart attributes the eventual acceptance partly to the growing precision of medical information.[869] It would have been a natural progression, he asserts, to proceed with dissections of human corpses in the effort to develop more specificity in both treatment and research. The normalization was probably speeded up, too, when Galen's complete works were finally rediscovered by Western scientists in 1317. Prior to this, fragments were in English translation, but the entirety of his reports had for centuries been available only in Arabic. The information he provided must have prompted investigators to see for themselves whether Galen's claimed anatomical descriptions were accurate.

Another of the currents that probably fed normalization was the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century popularity of Avicenna's "Canon of Medicine." Adopted as a standard by medical schools throughout Europe, Spain, and the Middle East, the Canon urged investigators not to rely entirely on data obtained from pharmacological experimentation on animals. Avicenna said the only reliable data was that derived directly from human beings. Jacquart says

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869. Jacquart 1998, 226.

one of the factors, too, may have been that university medical teachers probably tired of doing work that reminded them of the work done by butchers in their markets. They viewed their work as a noble undertaking and may have sought to do research that reflected something other than the work of a butcher shop.

All of this probably contributed, but these factors were only part of the confluence of events that came together in the early fourteenth century. General intellectual and cultural developments encompassed a variety of changes that combined to shape emerging values and tradition. It is in the melding of these that we find the clearest comparisons to the struggle that is shaping decisions about whether and how to intervene with the human genome.

Medicine, like all institutions, has always had its own culture and traditions. These in turn combine with other social, political, and religious values, and the amalgam affects everyone's lives. What we consider normal and abnormal has been strongly influenced by the practice and culture of medicine. Whether we think of a human quality as a cultural construct or an innate biological fact is shaped by the definitions of medicine because those definitions are determined by a combination of myth, fact, and social realities. For example, when we speak of alcoholism today, we are unsure whether to attribute causation to moral failure, genetic determinism, social situation, mimicking behavior, or some combination of all of these. Sexually transmitted diseases are similarly drawn and mental illness even more so given its association with everything from moral degeneracy, demon possession, skewed genetics, incest, and hormonal imbalance.

Understanding the complex of factors that accompanied the emerging acceptance of human dissection requires an understanding of the body not as a simple biological thing, but as a cultural construct. Some of this construction derives from the culture of medicine, some to meanings and values of other parts of the larger culture. In Greece and Rome, the classical body was thought of as inherently perfect, which was a reflection of its philosophical and artistic institutions. The body was described through the prism of those elements. The second century C.E. Roman Physician Galen said the body was a flawless example of God's universal design, a description he develops partly from his participation in the Greek and Roman medical cultures and partly from an emerging religious belief.[870] The Jewish and Christian traditions generally asserted the body is sacred, that it was created by God and continues to fall under God's ownership. In Judaism, the covenant between God and the people Israel is physically etched in the male body by circumcision.

Whereas the Hippocratic investigators tried to view the body as a natural phenomenon they could understand by the application of various observations and procedures, the construction of the body became increasingly complex as this mechanistic approach melded with other influences, including Galen's claims of divine provenance. Just before the early fourteenth century normalization of autopsy in Europe, the church may have abetted the process by its curiosity about the extent to which the body reflected divine action. In an Italian account

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870. Galen 1968. This essay, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, was written as a criticism of the Epicurean medical sect that disputed claims for the body's perfection of design as proof of divine creation. Galen argues their claim was blasphemy and he tries to support Plato's belief in the demiurge. He calls his essay a "true hymn of praise to our Creator." His assertion provided support for the emerging Christian claim of divine creation and ownership. The discussion of this is in Rothman/Marcus/Kiceluk 1995, 17.

of the life of Sister Chiara of Montefalco, an Augustinian abbess, Piero Camporesi describes an autopsy in 1308 performed on her corpse by four nuns who claimed they were looking for anatomical signs of her saintliness:

> Having decided that . . . it was not proper for that virgin flesh to be touched by any man whatsoever, and that her saintly body which had been a living temple to the Holy Ghost, should not be contaminated by the hands of a barber-surgeon, . . . four of the number, tucking up their sleeves, went into the oratory and with the utmost respect undressed the saintly body. Sister Francesca, inexperienced though she was, opened it as best she could with a razor. They then began to remove the intestines. She noticed that the gall-bladder was white and when she touched it she felt inside it three hard objects like stones, which were round in shape and together formed a triangle. . . . As they continued removing the intestines, they reached the heart and all saw that it was inordinately large. . . . and placing all the other intestines in an earthenware jar, they buried them within the oratory itself where the saint had died, to one side of the altar where to this day they are thought to lie.[871]

Some time later the sisters talked among themselves, recalling that the Mother Abbess had told them Christ had once appeared to her and said he would plant the cross in her heart. Their curiosity grew sufficiently excited that one night they went to the box, took out the heart, and with a razor made an incision from top to bottom.

> The excess of blood was such that they did not at first see what was contained therein . . . then Sister Francesca felt with her finger that in the middle of one section there ran a nerve; and when she drew it out, they saw to their amazement that it was a cross, formed of flesh, which had been ensconced in a cavity of the same shape as the cross. Upon seeing this, Sister Margarita began shouting, 'A miracle, a miracle.' . . .[872]

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871. Rothman 1995, 37–38.

872. Rothman 1995, 38.

With their mystical fervor peaking, Sister Giovanna suggested that the heart might hold still more mysteries and told Sister Francesca to continue her inspection:

> And in so doing, she encountered another small nerve standing up in the heart, like the Cross; and studying it carefully, they realized that it represented the Whip, or Scourge, with which Christ was beaten at the Pillar.[873]

When news of their discovery reached the Bishop, he gathered a collection of judges, doctors, and churchmen, had the heart inspected, and found not just a cross and whip, but still more miracles:

> . . . there were other mysteries of the Passion, to wit the Pillar, the Crown of Thorns, the three Nails, the Spear and the Pole with the Sponge, all so truly represented that (the Bishop) on touching the point of the Spear and the three Nails was pricked by them as thought they had really been of iron. At this point everyone was awe-struck and filled with amazement.[874]

The discoveries in Sister Chiara's innards continued, of course, until the Holy Trinity itself was located, along with blood that for many years afterward would boil, "portentously" during periods of mourning, catastrophe, war, or epidemic.

If theological justification was needed to assist the gathering momentum toward regular employment of human autopsy, the miraculous interior of Sister Chiara's mouldering remains may have provided it. That, combined with Galen's newly rediscovered descriptions led to a flurry of anatomical investigation. By The sixteenth century, the Brussels-born physician and anatomist Andreas Vesalius set out to learn with certainty whether Galen's texts accurately represented the human body. At first, discrepancies between what he found and what Galen said were attributed to changes that occurred in the human body

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873. Rothman 1995, 39.

874. Rothman 1995, 39.

over the intervening centuries.[875] In 1543, however, Vesalius published the results of his studies *in De Humanis Corporis Fabrica, Libri Septem,* containing hundreds of illustrations and full descriptions. It was the same year that Copernicus revealed his new understanding of the heavenly bodies. The discoveries set the stage for dramatic changes in scientific inquiry during the European Enlightenment.

A combination of forces led to acceptance of human dissection: time, religious discussion, scientific inquiry, and a new conception of the possibilities for healing. Earlier repugnance at entering the human body was replaced by the practical possibilities it afforded. The body came to be thought of in more mechanical terms, a development that came partly because of Vesalius's studies. These changes were complemented in the larger culture by the increasing conviction that there were orderly laws and causes to all of the universe. Divinity's dominion was pushed farther and farther away from the human realm. The human heart's imagination had again led humanity to cross one more proscribed boundary.

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875. Rothman 1995, 54.

## Chapter V: Conclusion

I said in the previous chapter that dramatic shifts in how we think about healing and the body were met by arguments similar to those made today against genetic intervention. Over time, as the perceived benefits of those shifts became apparent, the necessary adjustments were made to the culture's moral image so that eventually the old understandings were replaced by others that offered seemingly beneficial advantages. This may be merely a process of finding ways to justify whatever we want to do. But I think it is more than that. What we found were ways to incorporate into our moral and religious sensibilities those changes that did not unreasonably alter our view of cherished values. We could have continued doing vivisection, perhaps on grounds that the most complete understandings could be had by way of that technique. But we did not—not because it offered no profit but because it so violated fundamental strictures that we set it aside as repugnant.

Lucretius might say that our crossing these threshholds was a glorious example of human courage. Others—Oppenheimer, for example—might say that, perhaps, yes, it is courageous, but he would urge caution. For Oppenheimer, Lucretius's way of thinking wrongly suggests that the applications of science are separate from other considerations, maybe of the heavens, or of some universal law that, following Rescher, proscribes crossing certain boundaries. The mistake of thinking that scientific work exists apart from other realms, Oppenheimer said, led him and his colleagues to become "destroyers of worlds." Daryl Tress believes the dilemma of Oppenheimer and of scientific medicine generally has

been that both paid too much attention to the technique of their craft and too little attention to other important values:

> . . . the persistence of a spiritual dimension in healing in the ancient world seems to have spoken to an important human need for meaning and coherence. This need is generally neglected within the framework of strictly scientific medicine and neglected, too, within the secularist assumptions of modern ethics."[876]

Plato warned about this when he said, in reference to the Thracian healers of Zalmoxis, "who are also said to make men immortal" that "one should not attempt to cure the body apart from the soul."[877] But this is exactly what was being done by Vesalius and other anatomists in their determination to separate the mechanical construction of the body from the social and religious construction.

Nussbaum says Vesalius's project may have some of its origin in the thinking of Hellenistic physician–philosophers who were wary of Plato's apparent belief that the good of medical practice is in some way to be found "out there." She says the physician–philosophers opposed Platonic methodology partly because they were developing a medical conception of philosophy that cannot be conceived of as something that looks 'out there' to determine what health is; rather, a person's health is good for that person, and a doctor's "aim can never be completely separated from the patient's own sense of the better and worse."[878] She says they believed Platonism held that "ethical norms are what they are quite independently of human beings, human ways of life, human

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876. Tress 2000, 218.

877. *Charmenides* 156b–157b.

desires. The good is out there. . . and no wishing of ours . . . can make it be otherwise."[879]

This question is reducible, Nussbaum says, to whether what is good for human beings is independent of human *desires*. As such, it is the same question that is repeatedly asked throughout the stories I have described: does humanity alone set limits? And if so, where are they; if not, by what are they set; and, where are they?

Given that the questions recur and are implicit in modern concerns, how will we know where to get bearings as we develop the new technologies of genetic intervention, cloning, and *in vitro* fertilization? In the past, dilemmas related to medicine were resolved by a combination of moral codes, religious beliefs, the good of the patient, of the community, and so forth. Those will continue to be the source of resolving how we proceed because there is no generally agreed-upon and clearly articulated formal theory of the physician-patient relationship, nor of the community-patient relationship.

Edmund Pellegrino and David Thomasma say it is difficult to know where to turn, partly because it may be only partly helpful to look to the past for guidance: the Hippocratic corpus is contradictory and incomplete; our situation has changed; other sources are inappropriate for modern application, either because they are paternalistic or do not contain a full sense of accountability that extends much beyond kindliness. The various professional codes of behavior

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878. Nussbaum 1994, 19.

879. Nussbaum 1994, 17.

have been similarly lacking.[880] Yet they argue that medicine is at heart a moral enterprise, as well as an ethical endeavor. It is moral because many of its functions converge upon one end: "making a decision for a particular person who presents himself in need, as a patient, someone bearing distress or disease."[881] Medicine is a moral activity because it focuses on a right decision for a patient and there are values that should guide decisions. It is with the introduction of "right" and "good" that morality becomes a part of the effort. Medicine must also be ethical in that the physician's actions "must have some rational justification beyond simple conformity to one or another . . . code."[882] For Pellegrino and Thomasma, ethics becomes involved when morality becomes problematic, "when the validity of beliefs about what is right and good comes into question, or when a conflict between opposing moral systems or obligations must be resolved."[883] But they admit that developing a generally held ethical theory will be difficult given the divergence of views held by the various strains of moral philosophy.

The concerns about genetic interventions generally fall into three groups. One is that future persons have a right to a genetic inheritance unaltered by "intrusive" measures. A second is related to fears that state authority will develop coercive measures that either compel participation or otherwise violate privacy. The third is that genetic modification is "playing God." This last is a kind of appeal to nature in that it argues there is an identifiable human nature, perhaps

880. Pellegrino and Thomasma 1981, 201ff.

881. Pellegrino and Thomasma 1981, 224.

882. Pellegrino and Thomasma 1981, 224.

883. Pellegrino and Thomasma 1981, 225.

along with a divine teleology, and that by intervening in the interior of genes we would violate either the integrity of that nature or some other-imposed proscription. It is to this third objection that I will address the remainder of my comments.

The argument that intervention violates either nature's or god's will sometimes takes the form of claiming it will be the first in a series of steps leading to positive eugenics. To this, others point out that almost any alteration to nature, including the use of antibiotics, may be viewed as eugenics. The argument from eugenics tends to assume that there is some way to know what interventions should be classified as therapy and what as enhancement.

The argument from nature also employs the concern that the possibility for disaster looms if we alter the germ line. Examples of unanticipated consequences in medicine are widely known. If the effects of thalidomide had not appeared for several generations, the drug might have been employed throughout the world—with much larger consequences than occurred. Another example sometimes cited is myotonic dystrophy, the most common form of dystrophy. It is caused by a gene that grows bigger each time it is inherited, and as it grows, the disease worsens, causing more severe effects in later generations. The fear is that since this occurs naturally, then our intervention might cause other mutations whose problems might not be known for generations. This argument encompasses the general concern that there is danger that genetic therapies may be employed too quickly if their benefits seem too good to pass up.

The third concern in the argument from nature is that it threatens the 'humanness' we value. This is what Leon Kass fears, that a series of genetic changes over generations could alter us in fundamental ways.[884] This rests at least partly on the Stoic belief that all of the universe, including human nature, operates within a rational framework that is knowable by the application of human reasoning. It also sometimes employs an Aristotelian view that human flourishing requires that we act toward the peculiar end that is best for human beings. And it can call on Aquinas's view that there is a divinely ordered human essence and end and that we should pursue one thing rather than another to the extent that it does not contravene the divine nature of creation. Kass says cloning, for example, stirs an intuition in us that it would violate "things we rightfully hold dear." It represents to us, he asserts, something that would be " a profound defilement of our given nature as pro-creative beings, and of the social relations built on this natural ground."[885] He seeks to encompass both religious and secular views by arguing that the good of human sexual reproduction rests on its naturalness, its place in our traditional social systems, and its place in evolution.[886] Employing an assertion that these could be endangered by unnecessary interventions, he strongly opposes cloning and urges caution in other genetic interventions that suggest "the Frankensteinian hubris to create human life and increasingly to control its destiny; man playing God."[887]

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884. Kass 1998, 20–21, 34ff. Also see Kass 2001.

885. Kass 2001, 9.

886. Kass 1998, 13.

887. Kass 1998, 20.

Similarly, during discussion among members of the president's Council on Bioethics, William May drew upon Hawthorne's story "The Birthmark" to urge caution in how we proceed toward the future. In the story, the scientist Aylmer unintentionally kills his wife while trying to remove a blemish from her cheek.

> Alymer's intellectual forbearers heralded something new in the world. Whereas the ancient Greeks celebrated the human power for knowledge, the modern scientist celebrates the powers acquired through knowledge. The Greeks recognized that reason crashes against limits—the power of fate and death from without and flaws from within. Reason offers us, at best, wisdom in the midst of suffering, not relief from its toils. But modern science offers the dizzying prospect of the powers which knowledge itself can generate to alter human life for the good, the ultimate end of which would be to lift the burden of mortality itself.[888]

These various ways of using the argument from nature suggest that the problem inherent to it is how we are to define nature, and what tools we will employ in arriving at the definition. Given the pluralistic encompassment of modern cultures, there are many possibilities for conflict. If human nature is merely the chance occurrence of an evolutionary process over time, then it may have no normative quality. If it has developed as it has as a result of a teleological process or a divine plan, then normative requirements clearly accrue. But even if we could decide what human nature is, there is little likelihood, following Hume, that we could easily educe what we ought to do. Would we, for example, rely upon an intuitionist system to decide? A consequentialist? Communitarian? On Joseph Fletcher's account, if humans can exert more control, then more control is what we should employ. But Paul Ramsey's demand for constraints on human interference would send us in an entirely different direction. Some would assert that moral controversies such as this are irresolvable in a pluralistic culture

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888. See http://www.bioethics.gov/meetings/200201/intro.html.

because there is no agreed-upon ordering of values. On their account the various ideologies will enjoin each other in battle, leaving it to whoever has the most power, the greatest resources, the strongest authority to decide which ideology prevails.

However, because there is no algorithm that will produce a rationally certain solution does not mean there is no resolution to be had. The pushes and pulls that would have us proceed in various possible directions will, over time, sort themselves out, and some more or less acceptable way of operating will take hold. The interest groups will talk with each other, each bringing its own view of moral authority. Certain fundamental beliefs will serve as points of agreement from which reasonably satisfactory solutions will ensue. The beliefs employed in the solutions will be encompassed by the myriad ways of framing the values I listed in the previous section. For example, we will agree that future generations need to be protected from the whims of fashion, that people have intrinsic value and should not be used solely to benefit others. We will concur about issues related to informed consent and that resources be allocated in some roughly equitable way. These most basic ethical conditions will allow people with different interests to create standards and agreements. Some will maintain fundamental differences with whatever solutions are created. There will be some techniques and therapies we will not pursue and others that we will. As we resolve these difficulties, other issues will arise to focus our concerns. But the issues that so now perplex us will finally fade into an admixture of new and old elements of our moral image. The new directions we take will further enrich our moral image and it in turn will be employed in discussions of the new difficulties. Kevin Wildes comes to a similar conclusion in his discussion of ways to resolve

moral dilemmas among competing interests. He argues that the solution is to employ a system of respect for others and negotiation among groups:

> There will be no general secular view of how genetic therapies ought to be used. Indeed, because there are competing views of human nature there will be competing views of what constituties health and disease that, in turn, yield different views of appropriate medical therapy. . . . If all becomes relative, and neither a canonical ordering of values nor moral constraints on human actions can be established, then secular morality will be one supported by force, not reason.[889]

Wildes says a moral nexus between moral strangers can result if the competing interests are willing to weave "a fabric of mutual respect and the possibility for persons to create particular webs of mutual responsibilities through mutual agreement."[890]

What I have tried to suggest is that the stories I have discussed, as well as many, many others I could have discussed, show the living out of the complexity of this system of values that supports the individual living in community. This system is what Wildes refers to when he says moral strangers can create a nexus by weaving together their competing interests. By employing the narrative of ancient stories into this weaving, I am not suggesting that the values of the archaic period in Greece are the values of a modern liberal community, but they do include foundational elements of our moral image.

An analysis of literature extending from the Greeks to Toni Morrison would provide a more dramatic depiction of the continuous lineage, of Steiner's "continuities of the human psyche." The Greeks, along with the foundation

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889. Wildes 1998, 45–46.

890. Wildes 1998, 46.

provided by stories in the Hebraic tradition, were the beginning. We have inherited their ideas, changed as they came to us, but they are there, nonetheless, with the seeds embedded in them that would develop into our view of being human and how to be in relationship with others. Attending to those ideas, as I have said, could help us understand at what point in altering ourselves we begin to endanger those values.

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# Vita

Timothy George Elledge was born in Champagne, Illinois on July 11, 1946. He attended schools in England and the United States, and then in 1992 received his B.A. summa cum laude as a college scholar with an emphasis in classical studies and philosophy from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In 1995 he received an M.A. in philosophy with an emphasis in medical ethics from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The Ph.D. in philosophy was awarded to him in 2002 by the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.